



Greening Your Home

A growing number of homeowners are creating healthier and more efficient residences | By Jane Hodges

Gillian Christie, a publicist living in Southern California, grew up with an appreciation for the environment: Her father, architect Peter Christie, began incorporating sustainable materials and practices into his designs long before ecological “green” building became as popular as it is today. In 1957, he designed the family’s home in Maryland using as many natural materials as possible, including slate walkways and cork flooring. Floor-to-ceiling windows provided the south-facing house with passive solar warmth.

So when Christie embarked on a remodel of her dated 1970s home earlier this year, she didn’t consider it a big leap to employ as many green practices as possible. While her main remodeling goals included structural work to prevent leaks and mold, and to better fireproof her home’s exterior, she also took steps to improve energy efficiency. Projects included adding insulation, made from nontoxic materials, so her home would stay warmer in winter

and cooler in summer; exchanging single-pane windows for more efficient double panes; and talking with her contractor about installing a solar heating system—a future remodeling goal that would lower her home’s use of fossil fuels. She also took steps to reduce toxins by painting her interiors with zero-VOC (volatile organic compound) paint and removing wall-to-wall carpeting.

With sensitivity to sustainability in her DNA, Christie is a little “greener” than the average consumer. Her garden is organic; she uses natural cleaning products; and she wouldn’t hesitate to install chlorine filters if her community—an area known as Painted Cave, located in the foothills above Santa Barbara—didn’t provide its residents with natural spring water. But she’s typical of a growing movement among American homeowners whose concern about the environment, energy costs and personal health is prompting them to seek ways to create a greener home.

Going green, one step at a time

Whether they’ve watched *An Inconvenient Truth*, hired an auditor to assess their home’s energy efficiency, or taken note of tax credits and incentives offered at the state or national level for the purchase of energy-efficient appliances and materials, American homeowners are increasingly attracted to all things green. According to the 2007 McGraw-Hill Construction SmartMarket Report, the green home-building and renovation market—defined as homes that contain a specific green-building element in at least three of five categories (energy efficiency, indoor-air quality, water efficiency, resource efficiency and site management)—is expected to increase from \$2 billion in 2005 to \$20 billion by 2010. The study also found that among existing homeowners, roughly 40 percent of all remodeling projects now incorporate green materials.

Of course, “going green” means different things to different people—and it doesn’t have to entail living off the grid. Many people can significantly improve their home’s green quotient by making

small changes, says PJ Stafford, co-founder with his wife, Rosamaria Caballero Stafford, of nationwide eco-consulting service Green Irene.

The Manhattan-based couple came up with the idea for their business during a time-consuming search for greener household products they could use in their apartment. Their own experience showed them that the business has a viable market—busy homeowners such as themselves who want to incorporate safer and more efficient products into their homes but lack the time to research their options. Green Irene consultants charge \$99 for an initial visit, during which they give advice on how to convert a home into a more environmentally friendly abode through easy-to-implement measures.

Stafford says many clients don't realize that a handful of new behaviors can have significant results. Installing low-flow showerheads and faucets, for instance, can save a typical household approximately 45 gallons of water a day, according to Planet Green, an eco-lifestyle television network and Website.

Another day-to-day way homeowners can conserve resources, says Stafford, is to get involved in recycling, if they haven't already. Many cities offer convenient home-recycling programs and services. Chicago, for example, has a Blue Cart Recycling Program that allows residents to recycle glass, aluminum, paper and other materials without sorting them first. In some places, including Seattle, recy-



BUILT GREEN HOME AT SUNCADIA, COURTESY: ECOHAUS

cling is the law: a city ordinance prohibiting residents from putting "significant amounts of recyclables" (defined as more than 10 percent by volume) in their garbage containers encourages use of local recycling services.

The Staffords practice many of the tips they give clients. To reduce food waste, they invested in an electric composter—a smart option for homeowners who lack the space for an outdoor composting system—and use the compost in a rooftop garden. They stopped buying sodas and bought a carbonation machine instead, and now make their own fizzy beverages. Horrified to discover that their many remotes and other household devices used dozens of batteries, they switched to rechargeable batteries.

For families concerned about the air they breathe, cleaning and repairing ducts periodically

The kitchen in this 5-star Built Green home features cabinets made with formaldehyde-free cases and low-toxic, water-based finishes, and countertops and backsplashes made from mostly postconsumer recycled glass.

Green Rating Systems

Roughly 70 percent of home buyers say they are more inclined to look at a "green" property given a sluggish economy, according to the McGraw-Hill Construction SmartMarket Report.

The process of finding such a home is getting easier all the time, thanks to increased efforts by builders to use green products and techniques. In addition, many real estate agents have trained to become "EcoBrokers"—agents who specialize in selling green homes and in assisting clients with locating homes suitable for

eco-friendly remodels.

To help standardize what "green" means, several national and local rating systems have been implemented. On the national front, the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program ranks new single-family and multifamily homes, as well as commercial properties, according to a 100-point scale. Buildings achieve one of four ratings—Certified, Silver, Gold or Platinum—depending on how many points they earn.

Builders pursuing LEED certification for their projects are ranked on multiple categories, ranging from the sustainability level of their building sites to a building's water efficiency, energy usage and atmospheric impacts. Those who use the most energy-efficient techniques and materials earn the most points, and thus a higher rating. The higher a home's LEED designation, the more money consumers can save on energy in that home.

Regional organizations have implemented similar programs.

For example, in the Puget Sound area, Master Builders of King and Snohomish Counties operates a "Built Green" rating system. Builders seeking Built Green certification (which ranges from 3 to 5 stars for single-family homes and 2 to 5 stars for multifamily homes) must fulfill a checklist of requirements during construction.

Organizations in other communities, such as the Home Builders Association of Metro Denver, also offer Built Green programs; checklist requirements may vary among regions. —J.H.

can improve indoor-air quality, as well as heating- and cooling-system efficiency. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends that homeowners *have their* furnaces, fireplaces and other fuel-burning appliances inspected by a professional at the beginning of every heating season. Air filters should be checked monthly, and replaced at least quarterly, for the sake of energy efficiency and to reduce dirt build-up, according to Energy Star, a program of the EPA and the U.S. Department of Energy.

When replacing air filters, investing in a high-grade product is a good idea for homeowners who have a family member with asthma, says Stafford. MERV (Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value) 13 filters, offered by companies such as Koch, have a "13" rating on an industry scale of 1 to 16, with 16-rated filters appearing in sanitary environments, such as hospitals.

For homeowners looking for ways to reduce energy bills, there are now several varieties of compact fluorescent bulbs with

shapes resembling conventional bulbs, rather than the corkscrew shape many consumers know, Stafford says.

Additionally, inexpensive hardware accessories can optimize an "old" appliance. For example, a water-displacement bag installed in a toilet tank can shed water off each flush (as can using a low-flow or dual-flush toilet). Dryer balls can shorten drying time in an old dryer by lifting and separating laundry as it dries, allowing the air to flow more effectively.

More extensive upgrades, such as tubular daylighting—a system that captures sunlight from the roof and sends it through a reflective tube into interior spaces—can help light a home while saving electricity. Another smart upgrade is replacing a conventional hot-water heater—which wastes energy keeping gallons of water hot—with a more efficient solar-powered water heater.

Earth-friendly products

Interested in a green kitchen remodel or

home-furnishings spree? A growing list of brick-and-mortar retailers is here to help, and more interior designers are focusing on sourcing organic fabrics, carpets and upholstery produced without toxic additives. The green movement even has its own answer to Martha Stewart: environmental-lifestyle expert Danny Seo, whose design deals and endorsements have him involved in everything from advising Kimpton Hotels on how to make a greener guest room to designing a line of mattresses made from natural latex for Simmons.

At Ecohaus, a green building-supply retailer with stores in Seattle, Bellevue and Portland, customers can shop for home products including zero-VOC paint, recycled-glass tile and Forest Stewardship Council-certified hardwood decking. The company carries products that have what store spokeswoman Susanna Schultz refers to as "expanded value"—the products protect health, use resources responsibly and are extremely well-made.

Schultz says that while Ecohaus stocks



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many products popular with remodelers—such as sustainable-wood flooring and countertops made from recycled materials—renters can still find less-permanent ways to green their spaces. For example, they can use click-in-place Marmoleum (natural linoleum) flooring to cover vinyl flooring, and then take it with them when they leave.

Many homeowners underestimate the toxins present in their flooring, wallpaper and upholstery. Chemicals used in the creation and application of these products can have unhealthy effects over time. That's why green-oriented interior designers seek out vinyl-free flooring and wall coverings, and upholstery made from organic cotton.

Healthy floor-covering ideas include using free-floating area rugs made of natural fibers or organic wall-to-wall carpeting that can be nailed down, rather than glued to the floor. Another option is to skip carpeting entirely. At building and interiors store Green Sacramento, customers can choose from a wide variety of sustainable flooring, including cork (which kills no trees because it is made from bark) and EcoTimber-branded hardwoods harvested from ecologically well-managed forests, says Casey Keach, a manager. Also popular: durable Vetrazzo countertops made from 85 percent recycled glass.

"Shoppers love the idea that they're buying countertops made from broken Coca-Cola bottles or old stained-glass windows," says Keach.

Green practices with deep roots

Greening your home doesn't have to require buying all-new furniture or newfangled gadgets. Sometimes, simply returning to older methods can make a difference. Gillian Christie recently discovered this firsthand, by trading in her gas-powered lawn mower for an old-fashioned push mower, thus lowering her consumption of fossil fuels.

"My intention is to live with a minimal footprint," says Christie. "I'm thrilled more people are doing this now." ▲

Jane Hodges writes from Seattle.