

Green Your Home for Health, Energy Savings, Future Buyers

Spiking energy costs, concerns about natural resources becoming scarcer, and attention to global warming all are motivating more people to slash energy consumption and reduce their carbon footprint. Greening their homes is just one strategy some are using.

Brad Sandler, owner and managing broker of Denver-based Green Door Living Real Estate, a real estate company with a focus on green homes, sees homeowners and buyers placing greater emphasis on green home elements. And he expects demand for green—or sustainable—design to steadily increase.

While some “greening” techniques may be cost prohibitive, certain strategies are simple and economical to implement, and they produce immediate reductions in energy bills. Moreover, through greening, you can enjoy a healthier home and perhaps improve your home’s attractiveness to prospective buyers when you’re ready to sell.

Though not comprehensive, here are some strategies you can implement:

Appliances: Old appliances can guzzle energy. When it’s time to replace dishwashers, washers and dryers and refrigerators, consider investing in energy efficient models. Yes, their initial cost is a bit higher than standard models, but they can save energy costs over the long haul. Energy Star appliances, for instance, promise to demand 10 to 50 percent less energy and water than standard models. Sandler believes the energy savings that

come from such appliances would likely be compelling to prospective buyers, if you could show side-by-side comparisons of the energy savings between standard and energy efficient models. There are also rebates and incentives to buy such appliances, and incentives are listed at www.dsireusa.org, the Database for State Incentives for Renewables & Efficiency. Also, consider tankless water heaters. They deliver hot water on demand but don’t eat up the standby energy of normal heaters. For more on how they work, see www.eere.energy.gov/consumer/your_home/water_heating/index.cfm/mytopic=12820.

Garden: A pristine, lush lawn is never the top choice for sustainable gardeners. For one thing, keeping a lawn looking good requires a stunning amount of water, along with fertilizers and pesticides. Swapping lawns for native grasses and plants can deliver an attractive environment and one that requires minimal mowing, weeding and watering. “If the design is done right and it reduces maintenance, this kind of garden can be very appealing to buyers who don’t want to mow lawns,” comments Sandler. Insight on sustainable gardening is available at www.organicgardening.com and www.treehugger.com/files/2007/06/how-to-green-your-gardening.php.

Energy: Conducting an energy audit can reveal how much energy you’re consuming and where inefficiencies exist. Professional auditors use infrared cameras and other devices to gauge where you’re losing the most energy and they can devise strategies to cut consumption. That could involve adjustments to your furnace and air

conditioner; window or caulking upgrades; and insulation improvements. Immediate steps you can take include replacing incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents; adding weather stripping around doors; and lowering the thermostat setting on your water heater and furnace. Less obvious power eaters are the phantom loads that constantly consume energy for no good reason. Look around the kitchen. Do you need that many clocks—on the wall, and on the stove, microwave and coffeemaker? The same applies to DVD players, VCRs, clock-radios, computers and phone chargers. They're on all the time sucking small bits of power that adds up.

Recycle: In many communities, separating and recycling plastic, paper and glass trash have become standard practice, but disposing of other items requires a bit more thinking and effort. What about that old sink you just ripped out?

The online Freecycle Network, www.freecycle.org/, operates in major cities and places as small as Spencer, Iowa and Wasilla, Alaska. Its goal is to keep junk out of landfills. It's free to join and members simply post descriptions of what they have to give away at an online board. Freecycle participants respond to queries and come by to pick up the items. Disposing of e-waste, such as computers, TVs, batteries and other electronics requires special care. Here's a source, earth911.org/electronics/proper-disposal-and-recycling-of-e-waste/, of recyclers that accept such waste.

Home health and remodeling: When you're remodeling and doing daily cleaning, aim to create a healthy environment free of chemicals, dust, and toxins. Things like paint and paint strippers, caulks, aerosol sprays, and disinfectants all can off-gas volatile organic compounds (VOC), the chemicals that contribute to poor indoor air quality. Mold, dust mites and pet dander also affect a home's health and yours. During remodels, opt for green--formaldehyde-free cabinets, low-VOC paint, and floors and countertops made of renewable resources, for example—

whenever possible. Sandler expects that as consumers become more educated about the effect the indoor environment has on human health, buyers will start scrutinizing materials and the overall health of homes they're considering buying.

Certified professionals: When you're selling, buying or remodeling a home, hire professionals who are knowledgeable about green building practices. For instance, REBAC, a wholly owned subsidiary of the National Association of REALTORS® is introducing the Green Designation this year. It will educate real estate practitioners on green topics and strategies for greening their businesses and addressing consumers' green home interests. And Sandler senses something of a tipping point as he watches consumers' understanding of and preferences for energy efficient and healthy homes increase. Rather than green homes being just a side benefit for buyers, one day green homes will be an expectation, he believes.

Additional resources:

-American Lung Association of the Upper Midwest—Its site, www.healthhouse.org, provides home greening strategies and shows where potential toxins are in each room of the house.

-The Natural Resources Defense Council (www.nrdc.org/greenliving/toolkit.asp) offers an enormous array of green living guides on everything from buying hybrid cars and greening your business to responsible investing and supporting organic farming.

-U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Energy —The two agencies teamed up to create the Energy Star program, www.energystar.gov, with the goal of protecting the environment through energy efficient products and practices.

-U.S. Green Building Council (www.usgbc.org)—It has developed a rating system, LEED, to measure the greenness of buildings, and it promotes the design of green homes.

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