

Sustainability puts ‘Green’ on the front burner

By Barbara Ballinger, REALTOR® Magazine Online

The latest environmentally friendly home features aren't just good for the planet — they look great and are a huge draw for conscientious buyers, too.

From energy-efficient light bulbs to solar-paneled roofs, consumers have gravitated to the idea that they can help the earth by making smarter purchases and lifestyle decisions, even if it's not always cheap or easy. Many of these changes are happening in their homes, thanks also to manufacturers, builders, and architects who are encouraging green products.

What does this mean for you, a real estate practitioner? In order to be in tune with the growing number of prospects who seek a greener lifestyle, you should know about the latest eco-friendly housing trends. You also should be able to understand and explain [the terms](#) you'll come across as you scout green homes.

What's Made Us So Green?

“Interest in being green has moved across the country — it's no longer just for wacky Californians,” says Matt Golden, who founded Sustainable Spaces Inc. in San Francisco three years ago. The company performs environmental audits on homes, which tests for energy efficiency, indoor air quality, and other factors.

There are plenty of reasons why focusing on the environment has become so popular lately. Some people thank Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Others point to a growing body of green building standards, advocated by groups such as the National Association of Home Builders and the U.S. Green Building Council. Another factor, of course, is rising energy prices, which has forced Americans to rethink everyday habits and purchases.

Experts say one thing's clear: The trend isn't limited to one age group, demographic, or geographic area.

“Empty-nester clients like the low energy efficiency, and younger couples gravitate because of environmental concerns and the healthier indoor air quality,” says St. Louis builder Matt Belcher, chairman of his local Home Builders Association's Green Building Council.

Consumers Get What They Want

Home builders, retailers, and product manufacturers are seeking to satisfy consumers' appetites for anything green, offering everything from eco-friendly condos to water-saving toilets.

Time Equities Inc.'s 62-story condo-hotel going up at 50 West St. in downtown New York City will have solar panels on the roof, windows that help to keep out the heat, and an energy-efficient HVAC system that will automatically adjust cold or hot air. “We're even building our condo-hotel without a garage to promote public transportation,” says Phillip Gesue, Time

Equities' director of acquisitions and development.

Belcher predicts that in a few years green construction will become so pervasive that the term "green" won't even be needed. "More manufacturers are building components for the growing market," he says. "It will be a standard practice."

Trends to Know

Whether or not you specialize in selling green homes, you're likely to meet clients who are interested in living a more sustainable lifestyle. Here's a look at the green housing trends you ought to know as you navigate today's market.

- **Copper roofs.** Copper and copper alloys, such as brass and bronze, are showing up on roofs, entryways, facades, gutters, and downspouts. Despite being quite pricey to purchase and install, they're seen as a good long-term investment because they tolerate inclement weather.
- **Timber framing.** Timber framing requires significantly less lumber than the traditional "stick-built" housing and almost always incorporates superior insulating panels (SIPS), which keep heat and air conditioning from escaping the house.
- **Windows that beat the heat.** Low-emittance (Low-E) windows, doors, and skylights offer natural light while blocking the sun's UV rays that heat up the inside of a home, sometimes necessitating air conditioning. The special low-E glazing also stops the sun from fading fabrics, wall coverings, and artwork.
- **Rainwater holding tanks.** Capturing rainwater and storm runoff helps reduce the burden on local sewer systems and captures water that can be used in other ways, such as for watering the yard or flushing toilets. In the National Homebuilder [Mainstream GreenHome](#), a 4,000-square-foot demonstration home being completed in Raleigh, N.C., a rainwater cistern and detention tank system will show that 95 percent of stormwater on a site can be recycled, reused, and absorbed.
- **Chemical-free lighting.** LED lighting (LED stands for light emitting diodes) is a semiconductor that emits light when an electric current is applied. One big advantage: It contains no hazardous chemicals like other lighting does. For instance, compact fluorescents contain mercury and incandescent bulbs have gasses that hurt the ozone layer.
- **Green toilets.** Water-conserving toilets can boost your budget while also helping the environment. "Make smart choices in choosing products throughout your house, and you can save 30 percent to 50 percent on your annual water bill," says Ori Sivan, co-owner of Greenmaker Supply Co. in Chicago, which sells environmentally sensitive building products and materials.

- **Solar orientation.** Face a home or an addition in the right direction and build it with the right materials, and you'll reduce the amount of heat and cold that enter from the outside. That's what home owners Ross and Tami Bannister did with their new T-shaped farmhouse (pictured at right) in Grapevine, Texas. They wanted the look of a 19th-century structure, but the functions of a modern-day green structure.
- **Induction cooktops.** Unlike traditional cooktops that heat up the cooking surface, the coils of an induction cooktop release their energy directly to the pot or pan and its contents. That means less energy is diffused in the cooking processes. It also means that the cooktop surface remains cool to the touch, making it less likely that cooks or kids will burn themselves.
- **Geothermal heating and cooling.** Instead of using a traditional furnace that heats or cools air and emits carbon monoxide during the process, geothermal pumps are filled with water and glycol and rely on the earth as a heat exchanger. In winter, the system sends warm air into rooms; in summer, it brings cool air.
- **Attic heat blocker.** [TechShield roofing panels](#), produced by LP Building Products in Nashville, stop the domino effect of inefficient roofing material. Poorly insulated roofing lets radiant heat into the attic, which then spreads throughout a home and requires the owners to turn on the air conditioner. By contrast, TechShield blocks up to 97 percent of the radiant heat, reduces the attic temperature 30 degrees, and cuts energy consumption and carbon gases as a result.
- **Reclaimed wood countertops.** Fast-growing plants like bamboo, and already-cut woods that aren't being used, find new life as gorgeous countertops thanks to entrepreneurs like Ken Williamson, founder of Atlanta-based [The Craft-Art Co.](#) The wood he uses is readily available and comes in many variations of color and texture, from antique heart pine found in shuttered Southern mills and old dilapidated farmhouses, to red oak and Douglas fir just waiting to be recycled from the bottom of pickle vats.
- **Nontoxic paint.** To keep indoor air clean and cut down on landfill pollutants, many consumers are using paints that don't contain toxic Volatile Organic Components, or VOCs. These paints come in a variety of colors and finishes, and are offered by mainstream paint companies, from [Sherwin Williams](#) to [Benjamin Moore](#).
- **Formaldehyde-free insulation.** Building products such as insulation can emit traces of the chemicals they're made with, which pollutes the air inside of homes. That's why manufacturer [Johns Manville](#) in Denver made the decision in 2002 to remove formaldehyde from its building insulation and duct board.
- **Smart irrigation systems.** WeatherTRAK controllers automatically adjust watering schedules based on the needs of your landscape and local weather conditions. The system's "brain" receives satellite data with information about local weather conditions. An additional moisture sensor shuts down the system if it starts to rain when the sprinkler is on.

- **Green furniture.** When old barns, factories, and farmhouses are torn down, their wood can be salvaged for artistic furniture. Eric Mann, owner of [New England Country Custom Interiors](#) in Clinton, Mass., sells furniture made from materials that would most likely end up in a landfill. Mann also works “green,” using solar heat to power machinery to craft his early American furniture reproductions.