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Shedding some light on home solar

Consumers shopping around for home improvement projects may be leaning toward overhauls that can reduce energy consumption and save them money in the long run. This is a driving factor behind a growing number of homeowners investigating solar energy for their residences.

Solar power harnesses the sun's energy and converts it into electricity that can be used in homes. Many people are familiar with photovolta-

ics (PV), which are the panels that absorb sunlight and create an electric field across their layers. Another solar technology, known as concentrating solar power, is primarily used in large power plants and is not appropriate for residential use, according to Energy.gov.

According to the Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy, hundreds of thousands of solar panels have been put in use across the United States since 2008.

The upfront expense of solar panels is significant, costing anywhere from \$10,000 to \$14,000 for initial installation. However, comparatively speaking, homeowners can spend \$1,500 or more per year on electricity, so solar panels will pay for themselves over time. Keep in mind that costs may vary depending on energy needs and how many panels will be required to service the system.

The Federal Trade Commission's Consumer Advice

says that the amount of power generated from a solar energy system depends on a few factors:

1. The average number of hours of direct, unshaded sunlight your roof gets each year;
2. The pitch (angle), age and condition of your roof, and the compass direction it faces;
3. The size and strength of your system; and
4. Environmental factors such as snow, dust or shade that may cover the system.

Consumers can contact

their utility companies to find out if they provide homeowners who produce solar power with "net metering." This program pays the homeowner money or gives credit for excess power the system produces and returns to the electric grid. Individuals also may be eligible for energy tax credits or other benefits.

Homeowners may find it worthwhile to explore solar energy, particularly if they consume a high amount of electricity.



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How homeowners can turn attics into livable spaces

Houses typically feature various areas that are traditionally designed for storage, such as garages, basements and attics. However, with some renovation, these spaces can be transformed into livable areas.

Homeowners who would like to convert attics into livable spaces need to take certain things into consideration before starting an improvement project. While the attic may seem like it has plenty of room and is structurally sound enough to walk in, that's not necessarily so. To be converted into usable living space, an attic must be brought up to the standards of modern building codes, according to the design experts at Board & Vellum. Retrofitting beams and insulation can eat up available space in an attic. Thus, it is best to consult an expert to see if an attic can be converted.

Attics, see Page 6

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Attics Cont. from Page 5

Furthermore, an attic that was not initially designed as a room when the house was built can add extra “load” upstairs if it is converted. That could present certain structural problems. That means a structural engineer also must be consulted to see if adding beams, flooring and drywall will necessitate other changes elsewhere in the home to accommodate the extra load.

In order to have a functional attic room, building codes will dictate that it needs to be accessible by a full-size staircase. Also, it will need to have another exit in case of an emergency so that will likely be an accessible window, according to the home information site The Fill. Homeowners’ budgets and renovation plans will need to factor into these considerations. Homeowners also are advised to check local permits to determine what else may be required to go forward. It is best to follow the rules. Lack of a

permit for work can affect the ability to sell a home down the line.

Individuals also should plan for heating and cooling upgrades as the home will need to have ductwork installed in the attic, or at the least, a stand-alone heating and cooling unit. As heat rises, it can get quite warm in an attic, so ventilation and comfort should be considered. The attic will need to be wired for electricity for lighting and other needs. Air sealing and additional insulation can the attic space more comfortable as well. Consult with a qualified electrician and an HVAC technician and have an energy audit done to discuss needs.

Attic renovations can give homeowners more space in their homes, which can be used as offices, bedrooms or cozy corners. This is no small undertaking and all of the right steps need to be followed to ensure a legal, safe and successful renovation.



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How to recognize when it's time to replace windows

Windows are a major component of a home. Window installation professionals will tell homeowners that the average life span of residential windows is between 15 and 30 years. Most well-maintained products can last 20 years, so homeowners who have windows approaching that age may want to schedule a window assessment and possible replacement.

Replacing windows is a job that requires advanced skill, and this is not a do-it-yourself project. There are many qualified professional window installation companies that will work with homeowners to measure, order and install windows that will fit with the style of a home and local weather, all while providing features the homeowner desires.

For those wondering when to replace windows, Pella and Renewal by Andersen, two of the premiere window manufacturers, offer these guidelines.

- Difficulty opening and

closing windows. A window that does not operate as it should can aggravate homeowners. If windows are sticking shut or cannot be securely closed, it's probably time for something new.

- There's apparent window damage. Accidents happen, and if a rock is kicked up from a lawnmower and cracks a window or if spring baseball practice has gone awry with an errant throw, windows may require replacement.

- Drafts in the window are common. If heating and cooling systems are working overtime, drafty, poorly insulated windows could be to blame. Various agencies can perform energy efficiency tests in a home. Windows that are determined to be the weak spots should be replaced.

- Dated windows are present in the home. Older windows may pose safety hazards, especially those in older homes. A larger window may be needed to comply with fire

safety codes allowing for window egress. Dated windows also may simply look "old" and compromise the aesthetics of a home.

- Outdoor noises are noticed quite readily. Newer windows can help reduce noise transmission. So those leaf blowers, airplanes, barking dogs, and kids playing basketball up the street won't disturb homeowners as they try to enjoy some peace and quiet indoors.

- Fading indoors is noted. Windows that do not feature low-emissivity (Low-E) glass coatings will not block UV rays. Those rays can cause fading to wood floors and furniture or pretty much anything the sunlight touches. Replacing existing windows with Low-E coating alternatives can safeguard belongings and improve window efficiency.

Window replacement may be necessary when existing windows are showing signs of aging or damage.

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