

THE MONTHLY

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Up Front:

Eco Opportunity | by Paul Kiduff

This month's major expo of eco-home experts can help you go green, whether buy a refrigerator or building a house.

As I bask in the intense East Bay Indian summer heat (thanks, global warming), I can't help thinking how great I'd feel about myself if I had solar panels on my roof, like that guy up the street with the Prius who bikes to BART. But

I can get my green act together mañana, right?

While I can't afford the investment into solar panels, saving energy dollars (not to mention the environment) is within reach, even for those of us who can't switch over to sun-powered electricity. Even small changes to a home can pay for themselves in a matter of months, says Christi Graham, executive producer of West Coast Green, a major showcase for green building materials and techniques that takes place later this month in San Francisco.



Chip off the new block: Co-owners Taja di Leonardi and Nina Boeddeker showcase the nontoxic paint lines available at Ecohome Improvement in Berkeley. Photo by Lori Eanes

"Incremental change is really good," Graham says. "It is critical for people to understand that every single decision they make can have a positive impact." She points out that using a nontoxic paint instead of using the can containing VOCs (volatile organic compounds) can make a difference. "The simple."

Graham is no stranger to championing the cause of environmentally friendly living. The founder and president of Healthy Home Plans, a Mill Valley company that sells the architectural drawings of cutti edge green architects such as Sarah Susanka, author of *The Not So Big House*, Graham also co-founded Berkeley's Green Resource Center (now known as Build It Green), the first one-stop shop for information on sustainable building for businesses and consumers. She's also spearheaded environmental education programs in places where you'd expect to see them (Santa Cruz and Santa Monica), as well as places you wouldn't (Boise and Wichita).

West Coast Green, the largest such event of its kind, is not just an opportunity to schmooze with a solar water heater salesman. It's an outgrowth of successful green trade shows from years past, bu

now designed to take in the general public and accelerate the use of green materials. More than 20 vendors will be represented plus presentations and workshops on a variety of themes such as healthy home design, energy efficiency, and landscaping. Dynamic speakers like Susanka will talk about building a home that's the right size for your lifestyle, and environmental activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will discuss the link between building green and saving the environment.

West Coast Green is a response to the growing awareness and interest in green building. Twenty percent more green homes were built last year than in 2004, according to a recent McGraw-Hill/National Association of Home Builders survey. The study further predicts that the number will go by another 30 percent this year. Overall this translates to an increase in new residential green buildings from two percent in 2005 to between five and ten percent of home construction projects in 2010. In terms of dollars, this \$7.4 billion market will grow into a \$19 billion to \$38 billion market by 2010.

"Green home building is not a fad, but a trend, and one that is increasing at rapid rates," says Har Bernstein, a construction analyst for McGraw-Hill.

This is music to Nina Boeddeker's ears. And no surprise. As co-owner of Ecohome Improvement in Berkeley, which sells ecological products and provides advice to consumers, Boeddeker says green home improvement can be simple, fun, and well within budget.

"Work with what's already there. That's the heart of thinking green," she says. "You don't have to go 100 percent green and off-the-grid to make a difference."

Green building has grown big enough to need a more codified rating system, says Build It Green Executive Director Brian Gitt. Builders in California are using guidelines developed six years ago by Build It Green and the nonprofit Green Building in Alameda County. But there's no standard rating system to help home buyers be sure that a house is as green as the builder claims. Gitt's working now to change that.

"For the consumer to sort through the claims made by builders we need a seal of approval, like organic food has," he says. Such a system would use a third party to verify whether a builder met established guidelines in building a home. "It's an important way to educate the public and build credibility."

For those of us living in a drafty old home that leaks energy, Build It Green is a great place to get advice on the basics of energy conservation, beginning a remodel, or even just buying a new refrigerator. It offers residents in the nine Bay Area counties a free "Ask the Expert" phone hotline service. And anyone in the world can access the nonprofit's Web site to ask green building questions.

"People call us with all kinds of questions," says Gitt, who estimates the organization has fielded 3,800 green building questions in the last two years. Build It Green also offers face-to-face consultations with homeowners who come into its Berkeley office on an appointment-only basis.

The skyrocketing cost of crude oil might seem to be the fuel behind this interest in green technology but Graham begs to differ. She believes that Al Gore's documentary about global warming (*An Inconvenient Truth*) has already had a greater impact than gas prices. "I think that his message has landed at the right time in the American mind. That's the beauty of green building: You can come at it from any angle and it's still the right decision."

Gore's message, that lots of people making small positive changes at the same time can make a big difference, resonates with green building experts. "We don't just work with people who are going to build this idyllic green home from the ground up," says Gitt. "Even if someone's just putting in new

windows or painting—or something as mundane as looking for a furnace. It's everything in between

Most callers to Build It Green's advice line have questions about interior finishes, flooring, countertop and energy efficiency. But occasionally a call comes in with a more specific concern: whether to buy gas or wood pellet stove, for example. To this query Build It Green's answer team recommended a pellet stove, because they burn renewable waste products that would often be sent to landfills. The pellet stove also gets the thumbs up because they produce so little air pollution that they're exempt from Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements.

Like Graham, Gitt advocates doing the little things around your house that can make a big difference over time, in terms of energy use, before tackling grandiose projects like installing solar panels. The kinds of decisions can wait until you've waltzed through your house with a tube of caulk on the look for cracks where air is seeping into and out of your house. While you're at it, check the weather stripping.

"Make sure the house is well insulated," Gitt adds. "A huge amount of air is moving through the house if it's not tight. These things are not costly and they can save a lot of energy and money."

Some green products do cost more than conventional ones. Solar water heaters are an example. Recommended by Build It Green, solar water heaters use the sun's energy to keep water hot in a container similar to a conventional water heater. Most solar systems would include a gas- or electricity-powered backup for those times when demand is higher than usual. Also recommended by Build It Green are gas-powered flash water heating systems, which heat water on demand rather than keeping a hot tankful at the ready day and night. Both systems are more expensive than the traditional variety, but require so much less electricity to operate that the energy saved over 20 years represents more than 50 tons of avoided carbon dioxide emissions.

And thanks to Mr. Gore, we all know that carbon dioxide traps heat in the upper atmosphere and contributes to global warming.

Homeowners with renovation or construction plans will turn to Build It Green for advice about building materials. Constructing a deck or play structure without using wood treated with toxic chemicals can be tricky if the structure also needs to be weather-, insect-, and fungi-proof. There is still some pressure-treated wood on the market made with copper chromated arsenate (CCA), but it is now banned for all residential uses, so what used to be the alternative is now the standard.

Pressure-treated woods resist decay better than non-treated woods, and fortunately there are readily available brands treated with Copper Azolesold (C-A) or Copper Boron Azole (CBA), both safe for the environment and available in stores under the Natural Select label. Other non-CCA-treated products to look for are Preserve or NatureWood, made with Alkaline Copper Quaternary (ACQ).

Similarly, paint without VOCs is now easier to find, but you will pay a little more for it. A gallon of Glidden paint with a low VOC rating (50 grams per liter) goes for \$20.98 at Home Depot. American Pro, a zero-VOC brand, retails for \$27.99 at Ecohome Improvement in Berkeley. Some non-VOC paint at Ecohome Improvement runs up to \$40 a gallon, like the very popular Yolo brand, which comes in a sophisticated palette of colors. But you can also pay that for



Sample menu: Brian Gitt, executive director of Build It Green, holds up samples of green building materials. As a free service, the company fields thousands of questions every year from Bay Area residents. Photo by Lori Eane

conventional paint. When looking for zero-VOC paint, look for the Greenseal approval.

Chemicals are of concern not just in paint, but carpeting as well. We all know the smell (or is it more of a stench?) of newly installed wall-to-wall carpeting. This effect, called “off-gassing,” can linger at high levels for up to three years and comes mostly from the adhesives and carpet backing—as many as 120 chemicals, including toxic ones like formaldehyde, toluene, xylene, and benzene. Exposure to these chemicals can cause an array of symptoms from headaches to nerve damage and there are documented cases of children suffering seizures due to carpet off-gas.

Experts say this is one of the simpler environmental switches to make. Choosing a carpet made from natural fibers (wool, jute, sisal, coir, or seagrass) will eliminate the chemical odor and health hazard. But the material isn’t even as critical as ensuring that the carpet has not been treated for stain resistance, mothproofing, or with anti-microbial agents.

A 100 percent nylon rug that has not been treated with chemicals is generally healthier, say Build It Green experts, than natural fiber carpets treated with mothproofing and pesticides. A Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) Green Label is a good way to be sure the product meets the institute’s standard for low-VOC emissions.

Non-treated carpeting is relatively easy to find, but not all green products are. Making an effort to locate and purchase them—from solar panels to construction supplies and home products—increases the market and availability of these products.

“The biggest barrier is lack of information about the ease of finding these building materials,” says Graham. “It’s really a matter of the demand, distribution, and education. I really feel if everybody were educated about their options, they would find them.”

Paul Kilduff is a regular contributor to *The Monthly*. After writing this article he has had to reconsider his appreciation of “new car smell.”

GREEN PAGES

Build It Green, Ask the Expert advice line: (510) 845-0472, or visit www.builditgreen.org and submit a query by e-mail. In-person queries in the Berkeley office by appointment only. Information and resources for homeowners and building professionals interested in green construction.

Ecohome Improvement, 2619 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, (510) 644-3500; www.ecohomeimprovement.com. Ecological home improvement products, including paints, flooring, cabinetry, and countertops.

The Monthly’s guide to installing solar panels on your rooftop, “Let the Sun Shine In,” June 2005; www.themonthly.com/shopping06-05.html.

West Coast Green, (800) 724-4880; www.westcoastgreen.com. State-of-the-art resources for green construction and business development in the green construction field. West Coast Green takes place Sept. 28-30 at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium in San Francisco. Saturday, Sept. 30 is specifically geared toward homeowners.