

Buyers Starting To Think Green

By J. Lennox Scott

According to a recent survey of consumers by a national building trade organization, almost 80% of the respondents listed environmentally friendly features a concern when building or purchasing a home. As a result of this shift, more and more houses being built today incorporate some amount of “green construction,” causing something of a revolution in residential home design.

Green housing is intended to conserve resources that can help reduce a home’s environmental impact and energy consumption through innovative design, construction, and operation features. In addition to the construction, green housing can also be incorporated into the land development in order to save developers, builders, and homeowners, money by reducing costs. While green housing is still a relatively minor segment, rising energy costs and concerns about environmental degradation are causing the green phenomenon to become more mainstream.

So what exactly does “green” mean? Most homes that earn this label feature energy efficient heating and cooling systems, lighting, and appliances. Other examples include double-pane windows, blown-in insulation materials, programmable thermostats, occupancy sensors and timers, recycled building materials, and Energy Star appliances ratings. Green features can also encompass land-planning techniques that preserve the natural environment, as well as site development that reduces erosion and protects trees.

Because green housing can be somewhat ambiguous, there really isn’t a universally accepted standard for quantifying energy efficiency in homes. Many states rely on a form of the U.S. Department of Energy’s Model Energy Code as a starting point in defining a green home. This code contains energy-efficiency criteria for new residential and commercial buildings. It describes how ceilings, walls, floors, foundations, lighting, and power systems must be constructed to meet its energy conservation standards.

In 2001 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began applying its Energy Star label to new and existing homes. To qualify, a home must be at least 30% more energy efficient than a comparable home built to the 1993 Model Energy Code standards and 15% more efficient than the state’s energy code. The rating must be performed by a home energy rater who assesses a home’s energy usage. The website www.natresnet.org has a list of energy raters by state; most utility companies can conduct energy audits as well.

In addition to the obvious environmental benefits of having an Energy Star approved home, the official green-seal-of-approval can also add to the marketing appeal of a home. And some lenders are getting in on the green movement too by offering energy-efficient mortgages that can be used to purchase a new or existing home or to finance energy-related improvements. To learn more about green housing and ways that you can make your home more environmentally friendly, go to www.energystar.gov.

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