

EASY GREEN BUILDING IDEAS

A Factsheet from Austin Energy's Green Building Program

A baker's dozen things you can do when remodeling or buying/building a house for better health, energy-efficiency, and less maintenance.

- ◆ Buy or build the house that's the right size for your family. Remember, you have to furnish, clean, maintain, heat and cool the whole thing. Smart design can make a smaller house seem bigger and bad design can make a big house seem cramped.
- ◆ When buying/building a house, choose a house or a lot where the most windows will face south. A southern exposure will provide lots of light without much heat gain. Do not choose a house or lot where most windows will face west.
- ◆ Get as much shade as possible - with trees, awnings, solar screens, or southern low-e windows. Shade will keep your house cooler and lower your energy bills.
- ◆ Cool your attic with continuous soffit and ridge vents and radiant barrier (use radiant barrier decking for new construction). Attics can get up to 40 degrees hotter than the outside temperature. This excessive heat moves into your living space, making it uncomfortable and causing your air conditioner to work harder. Most A/C units and ductwork are also located in the attic and when these components are sitting in a hot attic, the cooled air in the ductwork will warm up before it gets to room registers.
- ◆ Install a cooling system with an efficiency rating of at least 12 SEER, and be sure the ductwork is totally sealed with latex mastic or approved "UL-181" tape (not duct tape!!)
- ◆ Use a pleated-media filter for your heating and cooling system. Don't use electrostatic ones. Pleated-media filters are inexpensive (\$3-8) compared to electrostatic (\$35-50). The new duct collection test for all filters shows the pleated-media filters to be 20-35 percent efficient, while the electrostatic is 10-12 percent efficient.
- ◆ Don't use recessed can lights unless you get the sealed, "air-tight" type. Recessed cans are not intended for use as ambient or general lighting, but actually for concentrated spot lighting. They produce a lot of heat and usually leak into the attic, creating a draw on conditioned air from the room and making the air conditioning unit work even harder to cool the home.
- ◆ Use as little carpet as possible. Carpets are like huge sinks that attract and harbor dirt, dust, mold, mildew, and other possible allergens. This is especially important if any family member has asthma or other respiratory problems. Use hard-surface floors as much as possible (such as ceramic tile, wood, concrete, true linoleum, and cork).
- ◆ Choose light exterior colors, particularly for the roof. Light colors reflect the sun's rays and help keep the home cooler.
- ◆ Use low-fume interior paints (VOC's for wall paint should be under 150 grams per liter, check the label). People especially concerned about the broad range of potentially health-harming chemicals in paint can also consider plant-based and other specialty paints.
- ◆ Avoid skylights (light tubes, also called tubular skylights, are okay). Skylights let in too much heat into a room in our climate. Light tubes are smaller and the lighting is less direct.
- ◆ Install exhaust fans that vent to the outside in all extra-humid areas (kitchen, laundry, baths). Indoor humidity should be between 25 and 60 percent for optimal health and comfort. Molds and dust mites thrive in high humidity areas and can cause serious health problems. Be sure to choose quiet fans so you'll really use them.
- Bring in plenty of topsoil (6" is a good amount) and use mulch and Dillo Dirt for a healthy landscape. Choose plants from the City of Austin Preferred Plant List - they do best in our area, requiring less water and attract fewer pests. Click here to view the [searchable plant list](#).