

## Advice on adding solar features to your home

by *Rosie Romero* - Jul. 15, 2011 03:02 PM  
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It seems like a no-brainer at a time when tax credits and rebates are as plentiful as the Arizona sunshine that every homeowner would consider a solar **waterheater** when it's time to replace a broken or outdated tank.

A solar water heater can, after all, cut your water-heating bills by up to 80 percent because it draws its energy from the sun, and that's free.

Still, more sophisticated solar equipment for the **home** - like rooftop photovoltaic panels - are not free. And they might not be for everyone.

In fact, rooftop panels that can defray the cost of cooling and lighting your home aren't even the next logical step after you install a solar water heater. What you should do first is decidedly low-tech: Make your house, appliances and systems as energy-efficient as possible. Once you do that, solar panels will be more effective - and more affordable.

That's because the less energy you use, the less help you'll need from your panels. And that means you can buy smaller panels.

So: First, invest in a solar water heater. Then, get a home-energy audit to determine whether you need more attic insulation, **EnergyStarappliances**, double-pane windows, an upgraded AC system, and caulk and weather stripping to plug holes and cracks that can let hot air in and air-conditioned air

out.

Then, consider adding solar panels to your roof to slash your electric bill and do your part for the environment.

Still, they're not right for everyone. Here are a few things to consider before investing in solar panels:

- Do you own your home? Renters can save energy and reduce their electric bills with solar equipment, but unless the landlord is willing to pay for it, you're unlikely to get your money out of it.

- Does your roof face south? Photovoltaic panels are most effective facing south. You can install them on east-west-facing roofs, but they're more obvious, produce less electricity, cost more to install and might not qualify for the same utility rebates as south-facing panels.

- How old is your home? If it was built before the 1920s, the roof might not be strong enough to support the weight of the panels. You can reinforce your roof, but it will bump the price of the installation up considerably. The good news: The 30 percent federal tax

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credit covers the cost of upgrading the roof.

- Can you afford it? You can get a \$6,000 solar water heater for as little as \$1,800 after tax credits and utility rebates, but solar panels cost more. A solution for those who can't make the up-front investment but want to benefit from lower electric bills: Some companies rent solar panels, starting at \$80 a month. The leasing company takes the tax credit and utility rebate, but the homeowner enjoys the reduced energy costs.

- Is your income high enough for you to claim federal and state tax credits? If not, leasing might be an option for you.

Final step: Buy a good system and hire a bonded, insured installer with a plumber's or electrician's license from the Arizona Registrar of Contractors and with many years of experience installing solar panels.

Since 2008, when our electric utilities started offering rebates to homeowners for installing solar panels, about 200 new solar installers have started businesses in the state. During that time, the rebates have dropped from \$3 a watt to \$1 a watt, and eventually, they'll run out. When that happens, many of those newcomers will run out on you.

Your best bet: Consider more than the bottom line when hiring a solar installer. Do business with an established local company that has installed hundreds of systems already. Work with an installer who knows how to size a unit and who asks you lots of questions about your family, lifestyle and energy use before recommending a product. Go with a vendor who will do the rebate paperwork for you (you can even ask most companies to accept the rebate on your behalf as your final payment for the job).

Patronize a contractor who will allow you to make payments as the job progresses instead of insisting on payment in full up front.

And never, ever buy solar equipment until you understand why you're going with a particular model or size and you feel comfortable with the company you're hiring. Reputable installers do not pressure you with "today-only" prices.

Going solar makes so much sense for most of us Arizona homeowners. It allows us to shrink our "footprint" on the planet; to save money; to add resale value to our homes; and to take pride in our responsible use of energy.

Just make sure it's the responsible choice for you, your family and your house before you tap the sun.

**For more do-it-yourself tips, go to [rosieonthehouse.com](http://rosieonthehouse.com). An Arizona home-building and remodeling-industry expert for 35 years, Rosie Romero is the host of the Rosie on the House radio program from 8 to 11 a.m. Saturdays on KTAR-FM (92.3) in Phoenix, KQNA-AM (1130) in**

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