

## **Building and Remodeling - What Does Green Mean?**

By [Ed Shreve](#)

There is a lot of chatter, these days, about "going green" in homebuilding and remodeling, but what does "green" really mean? House hunters and homeowners wanting to make a positive environmental impact are finding that green can mean virtually anything a marketer says it does. As with every other growing consumer trend, a variety of marketers have discovered the sales boost a green claim can give, and it's sometimes difficult to distinguish facts from hype.

### **No universal standard yet**

It would certainly be helpful if there were an "official" definition for what makes a building, project, or product "green," but, at this point, there isn't. At least, not yet, but it's coming. The National Association of Homebuilders is working on a national green building standard, and they have certified several hundred contractors in green building practices. There are also organizations that provide levels of certification for homes and remodels built with green features, such as the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council with its LEED certification program. Similar certification programs exist in many states, and even in some municipalities. For consumer appliances, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has the ENERGY STAR rating system. However, the "green" field is so wide, that with many products and materials, and even with some supposedly "green built" homes, consumers are still on their own in determining the legitimacy of green claims. The caveat here is the same as with any other type of consumer purchase: whatever the size of your project, doing thorough research up front will help you make choices you'll be satisfied with, not just when the project's done, but for years to come.

### **Common features of green built projects**

Despite the absence of a universal standard, green built projects do tend to have a number of features in common. If you want your own project to create a positive impact -- on the environment, on your comfort and health, and even on your utility bills -- you now have more choices than ever in eco-friendly designs, methods, and materials. Generally speaking, if your project can incorporate one or more of the following features, you're on the right track.

- Site the project in such a way that:
  - The new structure will make use of natural heating and cooling principles such as shade and passive solar.
  - The construction process and the building itself have a minimal adverse impact on the site.
  
- Reuse an existing structure rather than build a new one.
- Deconstruct rather than demolish, if all or part of an existing structure must be replaced.
- Reuse materials from the old structure where possible.
- Consider using salvaged materials from other sources.
- Use materials made from recycled content where possible.
- Recycle as much project waste as possible.
- Use building materials efficiently.
- Use energy efficiently:
  - Incorporate insulation into structural members (e.g., structural insulated panels) as well as walls and attic.
  - Use low-e (low emissivity) windows.

- Use a high-efficiency heating/cooling system.
  - Design to recycle waste heat.
  - Design-in lighting fixtures that utilize fluorescent or halogen bulbs, rather than incandescent bulbs.
- Choose materials and products with low or no toxic emissions (e.g., wall board, cabinets, carpets, paint and other finishes).
  - Choose sustainably harvested natural products (e.g., wood products that are certified sustainably harvested, bamboo flooring, carpets made of natural fibers).
  - Choose materials, where possible, that come from local sources (e.g., local quarries for stone, or anything that didn't have to get shipped long distances).
  - Use water efficiently:
    - Use water-saving appliances, such as low-flow or dual flush toilets and a tankless water heater.
    - Design to recycle wastewater (greywater systems).
    - Design to capture and store rainwater (sometimes called rainwater harvesting).
    - Choose landscaping that is climate-appropriate (e.g., if you're living in a permanently arid climate, consider xeriscaping instead of sod).
    - If you choose landscaping that will need irrigation, design-in a drip, soaker, or emitter system controlled by a climate-sensor and timing device.

### **Choose what's right for you**

There's room for flexibility. "Going green," says energy writer Marilyn Lewis, "can mean anything from where and how you build a home to the appliances and materials you pick, to strategies for cutting water and energy waste." This applies to remodeling projects as well. If you can't do as much as you'd like because of budget or other considerations, heed Lewis's advice: it's OK, you can be "a little bit green." Know what you want out of your new space, and do your "homework." Even a few carefully chosen features can help to lower your energy bills, improve your family's comfort and health, and potentially even improve the resale value of your home.

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