



Soak Up the Sun, Save Energy and Money

Solar power is no longer just a new-age novelty reserved for homes you see in magazines. Owners of average suburban abodes are catching rays to generate electricity and cut their utility bills.

One particularly bright spot in the solar energy movement is the heating and air conditioning industry. Major HVAC companies now offer residential systems designed to harness and run off of solar power, while remaining connected to the traditional electric grid.

“Think of it like a hybrid automobile that switches between gas and electric power,” said Kevin Lyons, product manager for Lennox, a leading manufacturer of heating and air conditioning systems. “With a solar energy system that is tied into the utility company’s electric grid, you use solar power when it’s available, but switch back to ‘normal’ electricity at night.”

What’s more, the energy generated through solar-powered HVAC systems doesn’t have to be used for heating or cooling; on a temperate day, the accumulated solar energy can be diverted to keep the lights on, power up the TV, and pop corn in the microwave.

Two Kinds of Green

Clearly, using less electricity from the utility company results in lower bills. But that’s only part of the story. Many utilities will *pay you* for the excess electricity you generate through solar panels. Through an arrangement called “net-metering,” any surplus solar power that’s not used in your home is fed back to the utility, and you get a credit for your contribution.

Beyond the direct savings on electric bills, the financial benefits of solar power keep on coming. For starters, homeowners can defray the costs of certain solar energy systems through a federal tax credit of up to 30 percent of costs for materials and installation. Most states offer additional tax credits, making solar systems more affordable than ever for average homeowners.

Finally, if you decide later to sell your home, the solar system you installed may very well pay for itself. A 2011 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that solar panels increased the value of homes by 3-4 percent, on average.

When you add up the payoffs, converting to a solar-powered HVAC system can amount to big savings for homeowners. Not to mention the positive environmental benefits of absolutely clean and carbon-free power generation. When going green puts more green in your bank account, everybody wins.