

Eco-friendly remodeling touted

By Ron Wilson, San Antonio Express-News
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With Spring Break just around the corner, it's a good time for homeowners thinking about sprucing up their houses to go "green" or make them more environmentally friendly.

Green can mean anything from landscaping with low-water plants to retrofitting energy efficient heating systems and appliances or just brightening up an interior room with fresh paint, said Stephen Colley, green building program coordinator for the Metropolitan Partnership for Energy.

In fact, the San Antonio Water System is holding its yearly Spring Bloom event today from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at its headquarters at Mulberry and U.S. 281. Visitors can get a plant, a water-friendly landscaping manual worth \$8.50, an indoor retrofit kit and dozens of tips on plants and appliances that save water – all for free.

Though some people may question the cost-effectiveness of retrofitting their houses green, that may not be the best way to think about things.

"When you get a plasma TV, you don't figure how cost-effective that is. You get it because it has features you want," Colley said. "Right now, electricity is going for about 8 cents a kilowatt-hour. It's never going to be lower than that," he said, so any steps to save energy now will pay off later.

Bust since the cost is a factor, Colley suggests the most homeowners will get the biggest bang for the buck by starting with the "building envelope," or roof, walls, doors and windows.

If the shingles need replacing, owners should consider putting up a metal roof because they help reflect sunlight, protect against hail damage and last about 80 years. If that's not feasible, Colley said, they should think about the attic space.

"The attic can be anywhere from 40-50 degrees hotter than the outside air, and that puts a strain on air conditioning systems," he said.

There are two strategies for keeping it cool: conditioning and ventilating.

Conditioning means keeping the heat out, and it can be as simple as painting the underside of the roof and rafters with a radiant paint that will send the heat back up to the roof. Or it can get more complicated. Applying urethane foam, which requires an expert, will help insulate spaces between the rafters.

Another item that fairly easy to install, and doubly green, is a solar-powered exhaust fan that pulls hot air out of the attic and blows it outside. Those are readily available at home stores.

Whether the homeowner chooses ventilating or conditioning, he should stick with one strategy and not mix the two, Colley said.

The other two simple weekend projects include weather stripping doors and windows and getting Energy Star appliances, which are more efficient, said Shanel Ramirez, partnership research associate. Weather stripping should be replaced every year.

Spring is a time many San Antonians start thinking about the outdoors, and SAWS has lots of tips on weekend projects that can save water and money.

Karen Guz, SAWS director of water conservation, said a good place to start is the agency's Spring Bloom event, where a dozen speakers will talk about water-wise lawn care and plants.

SAWS also has an extensive "rebate" program, where people get money back for water conservation.

A good one for Spring Break, she said, is the core aeration and topsoil rebate. A group of neighbors can rent a machine that moves across a lawn and extracts plugs of soil. The holes are then filled in with topsoil. This improves water penetration into the lawn and keeps the soil from getting hard during a summer drought. All participants can use the same rental receipt to claim their rebate.

For indoors do-it-yourselfers, SAWS has a free Indoor Retrofit Kit, that includes a massage-like shower head and faucet aerators, Guz said. They can be picked up at Spring Bloom or at a SAWS service center.

Though the water savings from the shower head may seem small, "it's the little things that add up fast," she said.

Using the proper shower head could save a single household thousands of gallons a year.