

LEED RATING

The LEED rating for homes is designed to encourage the construction of "green" dwellings that use fewer resources and generate less waste. Here is a sampling of the features required for certification:

1. Avoid environmentally sensitive sites and farmland.
2. Build within a half-mile of existing water and sewer lines.
3. In landscaping, use droughtresistant plants and avoid invasive varieties. Plant trees to provide shade.
4. Use water efficiency systems that harvest rainwater (for example, by installing a rooftop garden) and reuse "gray" water from sinks and showers.
5. Meet or exceed requirements of Energy Star for homes, a government backed efficiency rating covering insulation, windows, ducts, heating, cooling, lighting and appliances.
6. Use tightly sealed shared surfaces between garage and home to contain pollutants from motor vehicles.
7. Use carpets, paints and wood finishes that are low in harmful vapors called volatile organic compounds.
8. Use highefficiency toilets, showers and faucets.

Source: U.S. Green Building Council

By Keith Simmons, USA TODAY

'Green' construction guidelines go residential

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By Thomas Hayden, Special for USA TODAY

When Allison Friedman, a mother of two in Weston, Mass., set out to "green" her home two years ago, she came at the project with a lot of eagerness and energy — and not much knowledge.

"My contractor was reasonably receptive," she recalls, "but things didn't turn out as successfully as I wanted them to. We knew we wanted a more environmentally friendly home, but we didn't really know enough to make that happen."

That can be a common problem for consumers looking to make their lives a little more Earth-friendly. Especially when it comes to homes, figuring out what "green" means can be a headache — and an expensive one — without expert guidance.

For homeowners and buyers, it looks as if help is finally arriving.

The U.S. Green Building Council provides guidelines and training to architects, developers and contractors on environmentally sensitive construction. The Washington, D.C.-based non-profit group's rating system, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, has been the industry standard for determining whether a green building is Earth-friendly to the core.

But LEED has been available only for commercial buildings — until now. On Nov. 8, the green council will roll out a new rating system for residential construction, called LEED for Homes.

New homes and major renovations will be rated for environmental performance in several categories, including site choice and preparation, energy and water use, building and finishing materials, quality of indoor air and even for making sure the occupants know how to keep things running smoothly and efficiently.

LEED inspectors award points for performance in each category. For example, a dual-flush toilet that saves 10,000 gallons of water a year would earn some water efficiency points, while a graywater system, which diverts filtered wastewater from sinks and showers into that low-flow toilet, would earn even more.

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The more points earned overall, the higher the LEED category awarded. Solidly green homes will get the "certified" label. Those that have an even lighter touch on the environment can attain silver, gold or platinum status.

(The National Association of Home Builders, a major trade group, will launch a similar rating system in 2008, and there are scores of local and regional programs as well, but LEED certification is broadly considered the most rigorous.)

Internal air quality is an important but often overlooked category, notes green council vice president Michelle Moore. Children can be especially sensitive to harmful vapors called volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, which are given off by many conventional paints, carpeting and wood finishes.

"There have been so many innovations in terms of good ideas and technology that it's very easy to get low- or no-VOC products now," Moore says.

Moore says the desire for healthy homes, combined with growing interest in slowing global warming and other environmental damage, plus the need to keep energy costs down, has created a "perfect storm" of demand for green homes.

"The interest from the public has been extraordinary," Moore says. "People want to know how to green their homes, but not all products and services sold as green really are."

Moore says there's a marketing practice called "greenwashing," or adding an eco-friendly label to a product without actually making it better for the environment. Moore recommends doing some research and looking for green labels that are awarded not by the company itself but by an independent group.

So what does a green home look like? For one thing, it doesn't have to be dumpy. To prove that point, organizers brought a full-size, prefabricated home called the "mkLotus" to San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza for the West Coast Green residential building conference Sept. 20-22. (The "mk" is architect Michelle Kaufmann.)

The one-bedroom home comes with solar panels, certified-sustainable wood cabinets and even a rooftop garden of native plants that helps insulate the house and collects and filters rainwater for irrigation. (Sustainable wood is harvested in a way that does not exceed forest growth.)

It also boasts sleek, modern design, lots of windows and cool, welcoming tones. "Even just a few years ago there was an idea that a particular aesthetic came along with living in a green home — basically that you were going to be living in a tent," Moore says. "Today, there are a lot of innovative products out there that give you a much bigger palette. You can live in a green home and express your own aesthetic any way you want."

LEED ratings are for new homes, but what about renovations and do-it-yourselfers who just want to make existing homes a little greener?

Smaller projects are tougher to certify, Jay Hall, the acting program manager of LEED for Homes, told industry professionals

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at the West Coast Green conference. Still, the green-building council and other groups are working on guidelines to help renovators plan a green job, and homeowners are pitching in, too.

Friedman says she's happy with her sustainable-wood kitchen cabinets and recycled-glass bathroom tiles. But she was frustrated by the renovation experience and afterward launched a website called Rate It Green (rateitgreen.com). Environmentally minded homeowners and professionals can use the site to share renovation ideas and experiences.

Says Friedman: "I tried to build a resource I wish had existed when I tried to green my house."

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By John Swain

The "mkLotus" prefabricated home on display in San Francisco for the recent West Coast Green conference. The home has lots of eco-friendly features such as solar panels and a rooftop garden.

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