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Green Living

BY BETH CASPER

Sharon and Jack Cody have spent several years restoring the 1958 Salem home that Sharon's mother lived in until 1999.

Every step of the way, the couple grappled with which products to use and where to purchase them.

It wasn't just about upgrading the almost 50-year-old home.

Their goal was green.

"The essence of 'green' building is to think about where and how we acquire the materials we use in our buildings and to ask ourselves how we can create a beautiful and durable building by using materials that are kinder to our environment," Sharon Cody of Salem wrote in a guide to green building for Marion County. "In the long run, we must also ask ourselves if we can afford NOT to do what is right."

Cody and her husband, Jack, are part of a growing trend of people reaching for energy-efficient, low- or no-chemical and sustainably grown products when they start a home-improvement project.

Green building traditionally has referred to new construction. But with people looking for environmentally friendly products for everything from replacing a kitchen countertop to repainting a bedroom, a new term was needed.

Call it "green remodeling," experts say.

"Green is rapidly going mainstream," said Nathan Good, a registered architect and certified interior designer in Salem.

In 2001, a survey in Builder Magazine showed that 55 percent of Generation Xers said it was very important or extremely important to have a healthy, sustainable or green house. About 25 percent were willing to pay more for that home.

On the energy-efficiency side of green building, a nationwide survey released in October by the Shelton Group found that 78 percent of U.S. consumers say they would choose one home over another based on its energy efficiency.

Survey authors concluded that Americans are increasingly motivated to purchase energy-efficient products and services. They found that Americans reported participating in an average of six conservation activities in the past year, including efforts as simple as purchasing a compact fluorescent light bulb, recycling daily, installing solar panels and purchasing a hybrid car.

Shades of green

Not all green products or green purchases are created equal.

With the popularity and accessibility of compact fluorescent light bulbs, consumers are changing many household bulbs to save energy and, in the long run, money. One compact fluorescent uses 66 percent less energy than a standard incandescent bulb and lasts as much as 10 times longer, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Changing a light bulb - or even several - won't earn anyone a green-building or remodeling award.

But local architect Good calls any amount of green purchasing worthwhile.

"There are a multitude of shades of green, from deep green to a light-pale green," Good said. "Really, I applaud each one."

The shades depend on people's ethical, financial and aesthetic decisions.

The ethical decisions range from a focus on reducing energy use and chemicals to using only locally produced products.

"All of my clients have a different thing that is important to them," Good said. "From air quality and water quality to energy use."

Jan and Ken Nolley moved into a smaller 1970s home in South Salem to reduce their footprint on Earth, but all of their remodeling projects focus on reducing the use of chemicals in products. Jan is sensitive to chemicals.

For example, they do not want to use pressure-treated wood because of the chemical preservatives, so they are trying to decide how to build a deck on the outside of their home.

Their remaining options: trex decking made of recycled plastic or of cedar. Both would be considered "green."

The financial decisions also are a big part of any project for the Nolleys.

"Much of this is expensive, and that's why you make choices," Jan said. "You can flush your toilet less, you can put in a \$100 low-flow toilet or you can put in a \$1,000 low-flow toilet. There are all these layers of things you can do."

The couple have painted rooms with low-chemical paint, laid down bamboo and sustainably grown maple floors and used plywood instead of chipboard to reduce the formaldehyde in their home.

"For me, green building is living lightly on the land," Nolley said. "That means minimizing petro-chemicals, buying things that last, using local products, and it means air quality that doesn't kill you and it means reducing the size of your home."

Greening your home

Melissa Frybach of Environmental Building Supplies in Portland listed an array of environmentally friendly products that are catching on in the community:

PaperStone: A countertop material that is manufactured in the Northwest and made using a blend of post-consumer recycled paper and resin.

Reclaimed wood flooring: Includes "sinker" logs that have been reclaimed from rivers and lakes as well as flooring that has been removed from various buildings.

Low-chemical paint: Three brands of solvent-free, low-odor synthetic paints.

Recycled carpet: Several brands of carpet made of fibers spun from recycled soft-drink containers or recycled nylon content.

VersaTile: 100 percent recycled plastic interlocking tile.

Toilets that use far less water than typical toilets.

"The market for green products is just exploding right now," Good said. "There is more awareness about the impact our building has on our health, energy and environment."

Good said that the boost in the green market is partly because of people asking questions in stores, demanding more environmentally friendly products and encouraging builders and contractors to try something new.

The Codys have been part of that movement.

As they try new products, such as a Toto toilet that uses three-quarters of a gallon of water for a flush and beeswax and orange oil to refinish their hardwood floors, Sharon writes down the products and how they worked.

The result is a brochure used in Marion County's Master Recycler program. It is full of green ideas for people who want to build, remodel or retrofit a building.

"I believe each of us, as individuals, can start influencing change," Sharon said. "We can raise awareness."

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