

Solar Energy: Living Green
by Barbara Gargiulo

Sunny north Texas is a very likely candidate for the use of solar energy. A walk in many Metroplex neighborhoods will reveal that some North Texans are making the investment.

I recently spoke with a local resident about his experience.

“How did your interest in solar energy begin?”

We were certainly influenced by having lived in Germany and the West Coast of the United States where renewable energies have been around for many years. Also, my dad works in the field of renewable energies. I grew up with the idea of solar energy as a green alternative.

“What solar accommodations do you presently have in your home?”

We have a 3 KW solar system on our roof.

“Is going solar worth the investment?”

Going solar has certainly become more affordable with the current rebates and federal tax credit. It also increases the value of your home and you help the environment. It will take several years for your system to pay for itself but everything after that is free energy, which will be even more rewarding as energy costs continue to rise. I think especially here in Texas going solar is worth the investment. We have so much sunshine that we should put to use.

“How is it possible for a home to be totally solar—not connected to a grid?”

You would need a huge system, probably bigger than your south-facing roof space (or extremely lower your consumption). You would need a battery to store electricity – which is very expensive. Non-grid tied systems also do not qualify for any rebates. It therefore only makes sense for homes in secluded areas that are threatened by constant blackouts.

“What support or opposition did you receive from local electric companies?”

Our case was a very special one in terms of support from our local electric company. We bought a home in Carrollton with the plan to install solar panels. Being fairly new to Dallas we thought all of the Metroplex is served by Oncor which has a great rebate incentive in place. We were pretty crushed once we had to sign up with our electric provider for the new home and found out that Oncor was not available in our area. The local Co-op did not have a rebate plan at that time and it took a lot of emails and follow-ups until we were finally informed at the end of 2009 that the incentives were available. The rebate is still not as great as Oncor’s but we still went for it and got the maximum rebate of \$5,000.

“What advice would you give to a homeowner who is interested in using solar?”

Make sure that your home has enough un-shaded roof space that faces south or think about building a carport or any other construction that allows capturing southern sun. Otherwise your investment might not be worth it. Do your research about rebates and tax credits to plan your budget. It also helps to have past energy bills available to do some calculations. Compare different providers and ask for free quotes and the expected output. Also consider manufacturers’ warranties.

A rough range of upfront costs is \$30,000-\$40,000. This can change with particular needs and willingness to “do it yourself”. This initial cost does not consider tax rebates or other incentives that can save up to 80% of the cost. Taking energy directly from the sun is becoming more popular and more affordable.

Under current policies, solar energy is projected to supply just over 1% of US electricity by 2030. If government becomes involved and requires utilities to generate electricity from renewable resources, forecasts are even higher. It's time for us to follow the path towards renewable sources.