GREEN HOME GUIDE

a complete guide to buying & selling a green home

Green Home Gnome

www.greenhomegnome.com

WWW.GREENHOMEGNOME.COM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 GREEN HOME BASICS

1.1 WHAT IS A GREEN HOME?

The term "green home" means different things to different people. Some only consider a home green if it lives up to the highest LEED standard, whereas others are less interested in the formalities of certification. In general, however, a green home uses less energy and is built with sustainable building materials that have lower embodied energy than a conventional home. Here are some of their common characteristics:

Sustainable materials

Construction, renovation and demolition waste constitutes as much as one-third of Canada's total municipal solid waste (SOURCE: Public Works and Government Services Canada). Big, bulky building materials place a heavy burden on the environment because of their high-embodied energy and massive carbon footprint.

Green builders see the folly of their conventional counterparts and seek to change the way homes are built. They try to reduce materials wherever possible, and for the materials they do use, they tend towards products that have the following attributes:

- locally sourced
- recycled
- reused
- durable
- made using renewable energy
- composed of rapidly renewable resources
- contain as little embodied energy as possible

So, to the green builder, a wooden window frame made from local wood is preferable over aluminum frames that were built in a fossil-fuel powered factory and shipped a great distance. And using locally available earth to build a home makes more sense than using bricks and wood. Similarly, using rapidly renewable bamboo would be favoured over tiles.

Energy efficiency

According to the 2011 Human Activity and the Environment report, Canadian households accounted for 45 per cent of Canada's total greenhouse gas emissions. (SOURCE: Statistics Canada).

Since homes place such a high demand on municipal electricity and water utilities, Canadian green home owners try to alleviate this massive use of energy by installing energy-efficient renewable energy systems, such as solar panels and ENERGY STAR appliances.

But energy efficiency alone does not make a home sustainable. Someone could build a massive net-zero energy home using concrete, steel and bricks on environmentally sensitive land, making it inherently unsustainable.

Size and design

As mentioned in the previous example, for a home to be sustainable thought has to go into what it's made from and how it's made, not just how it operates. Similarly, the larger the home the less sustainable it is because it inherently has a larger physical footprint and higher embodied energy. It would be really hard for 5000 sq. ft. home, even with all the latest renewable energy systems, to be more sustainable than a 1500 sq. ft. home, for example.

Passive solar / passive houses are sustainable building designs that don't require any special systems to be energy efficient since they already are energy efficient by design. Smart design is akin to solving a problem at its root. Building intelligently up from the roots makes for a sound structure.

Location

Green homes are often built on already developed land to reduce their environmental impact. Sprawl is inherently unsustainable because it chews up green space. There's nothing "green" about that. Green homes are also commonly built in close proximity to community resources to minimize homeowners' transportation demands.

Healthy homes

Since Canadians spend an estimated 90 per cent of their time indoors (SOURCE: Health Canada), indoor air quality (which is often worse than outdoor air quality) is a major concern, particularly to those with environmental sensitivities. Green homes give occupants greater control over their indoor environment and promote better ventilation, lighting and comfort. Designers use furniture, paints and other household products that emit little or no volatile organic compounds (VOC)—chemicals that are harmful when inhaled.

Life cycle

The concept of "cradle to grave" life cycle assessments have gained popularity in recent years because people are demanding to know the full picture, the true story of a product so they can wring the greenwash out of it. Green homes are no different. Since homes all have a lifespan, it's important to think about what will happen to the materials when they're done. Just as green homes use reused or recycled materials, how reusable or recyclable will the materials be for future generations.

1.2 WHAT IS A HEALTHY HOME?

Indoor air can contain two to five times the level of pollutants as outdoor air. In some cases 100 times as much (SOURCE: EPA). And as air quality has worsened, we're becoming more highly sensitized to it. Allergies, asthma and the newer condition, multiple chemical sensitivity, have been on the rise in recent years. With Canadians spending 90 per cent of their time indoors, and about half their time at home, it's no surprise then that interest in healthy homes is growing (SOURCE: Health Canada).

Healthy home characteristics

Chemical-free – Low- or no-VOC paints and flooring, adhesives and other building materials that contain little to no formaldehyde and other chemicals.

Proper ventilation – Ventilation systems should remove airborne contaminants such as dust and cooking-related byproducts by exhausting to the outside while providing a change of air pressure that ensures proper movement of air. Some other ventilation features of healthy homes include: local exhaust with occupancy sensor; automatic timer that operates a fan for 20-plus minutes post-occupancy; limited pressure differential between closed room and adjacent spaces; sealing all penetrations between garage and adjacent rooms; and space water heating equipment being designed with closed combustion, proper exhaust or located outside.

Moisture control – Mould and moisture triggers asthma attacks and allergic reactions. By maintaining a home at the right moisture level (somewhat dry) through an automatic humidistat controller, these conditions are prevented. As well, cockroaches, dust mites and rodents are kept out.

Clean – Research has shown a connection between dust and asthma attacks. Since approximately two-thirds of dust in homes comes from outdoors, green homes control indoor contaminants through air filtration and central vac systems that exhaust outdoors as well as through permanent walk-off mats at entryways. Green homes are clean homes, designed to avoid dirt and dust buildup through the installation of easy-to-clean surfaces.

Safety – Homes that meet safety requirements. For example, natural gas stoves would have electronic pilots and carbon monoxide monitors would be located on each floor.

Comfort – Green homes are designed to be more well insulated, have better temperature control, insulate sound better, and improve daylighting, making for a more comfortable living experience and quality of life.

Minimal electromagnetic radiation – Green homes minimize EM radiation by: using LED lights instead of fluorescents; maximizing the use of natural lighting wherever possible; wiring the house so that bedrooms have minimal exposure to electrical fields; and locating motorized equipment away from living spaces.

Sources:

Health Canada: Indoor Air Pollutants
Toronto Public Health: Healthy People, Healthy Environment
Alliance for Healthy Homes: A Healthy Home Environment
U.S. Green Building Council: LEED for Homes Checklist
EcoNest: Healthy Building

1.3 BENEFITS OF A GREEN HOME

With 42 per cent of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) being produced at home, buying a green home could be the single best thing you could do for the environment. And the environment isn't the only thing that stands to benefit from buying green—your health, comfort, finances and community can also realize substantial benefits.

Environment

Reduced GHG emissions – Built with lower embodied energy and designed to reduce energy consumption, green homes mean less emissions. An ENERGY STAR home, for example, can keep as much as 2000 kg of greenhouse gases out of the air every year.

Reduced waste and use of resources – Since approximately one-third of Canada's waste comes from building, opting for a green home that economizes materials and uses recycled and reused materials means far less waste and the peace of mind knowing that your home economized on materials.

Preserving environmentally sensitive land – In general, the larger the home, the larger the footprint.Green homes are designed to do more with less. More functional space means less actual space is needed, resulting in a smaller impact on the environment.

Durable – Home renovations have a significant impact on the environment once building materials, transportation of those materials, energy

consumption and waste are accounted for. By choosing materials such as fibre-cement over vinyl siding and metal roofing over asphalt shingles, green homes are designed to last longer and require less renovation.

Health and quality of life

Indoor air quality (IAQ) – Green homes use low- or zero-VOC paints and building materials that have little or no formaldehyde, saving your respiratory and immune systems from getting stressed. Good ventilation moves chemicals and odours out of the home quickly, ensuring less exposure to the harmful effects of chemicals and the unpleasant smell of bad odours.

Comfort – Since green homes tend to have better insulation, they produce less temperature variations between rooms and minimize drafts.

Quieter – Triple-paned windows and increased insulation do a better job preventing sound from entering the home.

Finance

Loan, tax and insurance rebates – Green homes qualify for a 10 per cent mortgage loan insurance premium refund and extended amortization period from Canadian Mortgage and Homes Corporation (CMHC). A number of tax rebates and other incentives are available to Canadians. Visit the Financial Assistance page on Natural Resource Canada's Office of Energy Efficiency site for details.

Lower operating costs – With utility rates steadily climbing, renewable energy sources such as solar PV or wind will produce more energy savings than ever before. Other resource-saving alternatives include low-flow showers, rainwater harvesting, and xeriscaping. Homeowners buying a home built according to the Passive House specification, for example, can expect their home to consume 90 per cent less heating energy than a conventional home.

Increased resale value – Though just some people will pay a premium to live in a green home, everyone likes to save money on utility bills, making green homes a wise investment. A study by the Earth Advantage Institute found that homes certified with ENERGY STAR or LEED designations sold for 30 per cent more than conventionally built homes.

1.4 GREEN BUILDING MATERIALS

Though there's some debate over what are considered "green building materials," it's hard to debate the sustainability of certain construction materials and practices. The Construction Specifications Institute assesses green building materials according to the following criteria:

Resource efficiency

Recycled content – Building materials that are made with recycled content *(i.e. papercrete, enviroboard, wood-plastic composite).*

Recyclable or reusable – Different than the above—materials that are not necessarily made of recycled content, but can be recycled or reused (i.e. *metals, wood, plastic, glass).*

Durable – Materials that last longer don't need to be replaced as often (i.e. s*tone, copper roofing, hardwood flooring, and any high-quality furniture and cabinetry that lasts a long time).*

Renewable, natural or plentiful - The preference is towards materials that grow rapidly and are sustainably harvested *(i.e. bamboo, cork, straw and FSC-certified wood).*

Locally available – Products obtained locally or regionally reduce transportation demands and thus emit less greenhouse gases *(i.e. earth used for rammed earth and compressed earth blocks).*

Salvaged, deconstructed, remanufactured or refurbished – Grabbing something before it goes to the dump doesn't just mean one less product that's added to the waste stream, but one less product that needs to be manufactured *(i.e. furniture and fixtures such as cabinets, doors, windows and floors).*

Resource efficient manufacturing process – Green building tends towards manufacturers that have efficient manufacturing processes that use less energy, output less greenhouse gases and produce less waste than conventional manufacturers.

Indoor air quality (IAQ)

Low or non-toxic – Materials that emit little or no carcinogens, irritants or reproductive toxicants.

Low-VOC / Minimal chemical emissions – Materials that emit minimal or no volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as low- or zero-VOC paint.

Moisture resistant – By resisting moisture, materials inhibit biological growth such as mould and last longer.

Healthfully maintained – Materials that can be cleaned using non-toxic or low-VOC cleaning products.

Health-promoting technology – Devices that assess the indoor air quality (IAQ) and enhance air quality, such as IAQ monitoring instruments.

Energy efficiency

Any systems, materials and components that reduce energy consumption, such as:

- solar photovoltaics
- solar hot water heating
- geothermal
- wind turbines
- micro hydro

Water conservation

Materials and systems that conserve water, such as:

- rainwater harvesting
- low-flow toilets
- grey-water systems

1.5 HOME RENEWABLE ENERGY SYSTEMS

The whir of a wind turbine on a breezy day or the sight of a roofful of solar panels is a good feeling for any green home owner. There's a certain harmony between living in a sustainably built home and drawing energy from renewable sources, which is why renewable energy systems are as popular as they are among green home owners. As technology rapidly advances in the world of renewable energy, prices are plummeting, making now a great time to invest in a renewable energy system. To lower costs further, it's also possible to take advantage of government incentives and utility rebates, which are available across the country (see NRCan Office of Energy Efficiency's Financial Assistance page).

Solar photovoltaic

With near-daily technological innovations and with China cranking out solar panels at amazingly low prices (and the rest of the world struggling to compete!), solar photovoltaic (PV) systems have become an incredibly cost-effective renewable energy opportunity.

PV systems, commonly known as solar panels, directly convert the sun's rays into useable energy to power anything from computers to fridges (as long as the system can crank out enough juice). They either feed that energy straight to the appliances or store the energy in a battery. Panels are generally placed on the roof, but can also be mounted on poles or walls (south-facing).

Though areas with high PV potential, such as sunny Alberta, Saskatchewan or the Okanagan Valley in BC, are ideal places for solar PV, with recent innovations a good payback can be had from just about anywhere.

Solar hot water

If you've ever left your hose sitting in the sun all day you'll know how much the water left sitting inside it can heat up. That simple principle is the basic idea behind solar water heating. Some of the best value in renewable energy

systems comes from solar hot water. It can produce 50 per cent or more of a home's water heating costs.

Open-loop systems consist of roof-mounted collectors that absorb the sun's rays and heat water that then gets used in the home. Closed-loop systems work the same way except the sun is used to heat up a heat-transfer fluid such as diluted antifreeze to absorb the heat that then gets transferred to the household water supply via heat exchanger. Closed-loop systems are great for a country such as Canada where water freezes much of the year.

Geothermal

Heat naturally transfers from hot to cold places. Heat pumps work on this principle of transferring heat from the ambient environment using a pump. When a pump is placed outside it absorbs heat from the outside and delivers it into the building. They're extremely efficient heaters as they can deliver three times as much energy in heat as they consume in electricity.

In the cold Canadian climate, however, typical heat pumps are not that effective because there's too great a difference between the cold outdoors and warm indoors, but since underground temperature is more stable than air temperature, geothermal versions of heat pumps are a good solution for the Canadian winter. These underground pumps are either dug into the earth (drilled vertically down into the ground or laid horizontally in a trench) or placed in a body of water. They exchange heat with the earth or water via antifreeze solution that gets heated in the winter or cooled in the summer, then pumped up into the home.

Geothermal heat pumps are highly resource and economically efficient in Canada since they can provide both heating and cooling. A 2007 study found that the average Canadian home when using geothermal averted 1.1 to 6.1 tons of CO_2 emissions and saved approximately $1,000 per year (SOURCE: Ground Source Heat Pump Systems in Canada).

Wind turbines

Humans have been harnessing wind energy for more than a millennium. This proven technology evolved from simple windmills, which were used to draw water or grind grain, to today's advanced wind turbines. Turbines

come in two basic types, horizontal and vertical axis, though by far the most common seen for home use is the horizontal axis.

Wind turbines need a good amount of wind to function cost-effectively. There are exceptions to this rule, since certain wind turbines are designed to operate well at low wind speeds. But even still, the more wind the better. The power generated by wind is proportional to the cube of wind speed. So, a doubling of wind speed from 10 to 20 mph results in eight times more power. In areas with a consistent, strong breeze, wind turbines are a great solution for home energy needs.

Micro hydro

Just as hydroelectric power plants provide so much of Canada's electricity, small-scale micro hydro can offer abundant energy to individual homeowners. Like wind turbines, these systems utilize a turbine to generate electricity, except it's running water that's creating the power, not wind.

Micro hydro will only work for homes that have a stream nearby. And the faster that water flows the more electricity produced.

Wood-fuelled heating

Since so much of Canada is covered with forests, wood is a plentiful resource that can also be a sustainable one when reforestation is practiced. The burning process only releases CO2 that was absorbed in the tree when it was growing. Forests always have deadfall or snags (standing dead) that are rotting away and releasing CO2 anyways, albeit at a much slower rate. By replacing dead trees, wood harvesting can become even more sustainable.

Wood-burning stoves can be used to heat up a single room whereas a boiler can be used to heat an entire home. For properties endowed with big forests, wood is a great option since it can be sourced locally and at no cost (aside from reforestation costs).

1.6 GREEN HOME CERTIFICATIONS

With the proliferation of green building in recent years, a number of certification programs have come online to ensure consumers get a "green" house rather than a "greenwashed" house. Common to young industries such as this, many new players are getting involved, some of whom have their own ideas of what is considered "green." This discrepancy of opinion can confuse the consumer. So to clear up this uncertainty, standards have been developed to ensure that home buyers get what they pay for. Read through the different standards below grouped according to specific need (comprehensive certification, energy efficiency, or other specialized certifications) and look out for these certifications when browsing home listings.

Which party?

When evaluating a green building certification system, the most important question to ask is whether its being done by a first-, second- or third-party.

First-party assessments are done by the certifying organization itself (or by someone related to the certifying organization). Second-party assessments are done by a trade association or other interested party and third-party assessments are performed by an independent party who has no financial interest in the outcome of the assessment.

Evaluation

To evaluate a rating system, Reed Construction Data suggests using the following four principles to determine their effectiveness:

- Science-based - Results/decisions must be reproducible by others using the same standard.
- Transparent - The standards and process for awarding the certification should be transparent and open for examination.
- Objective - The certification body should be free of conflict.
- Progressive - The standard should advance industry practices, not simply reward business as usual.

Common third-party rating systems being used in Canada are listed below, grouped according to specific need (comprehensive certification, energy efficiency, or other specialized certification). Determine what your needs are then compare the different systems to find which ones work for you. It's fine to have a preference, but with a limited number of certified green homes on the market, it's a good idea to keep your options open.

Comprehensive

LEED

An internationally recognized building certification system, LEED is being used by green builders in 41 countries across the globe. The Canada Green Building Council (CaGBC) administers the LEED certification process in Canada. This third-party verification system uses a rigorous 100-point scale to measure a home's sustainability. The rating system starts with certified, then goes up to silver, gold and platinum. It's based on the following eight categories:

- site selection
- water efficiency
- materials and resources
- energy and atmosphere
- indoor environmental quality
- location and linkages
- awareness and education
- innovation

Living Building Challenge

"What if every single act of design and construction made the world a better place?" That is the question at the heart of the Living Building Challenge, a philosophy, advocacy tool and third-party certification program that strives to that create a future that's socially just, culturally rich and ecologically restorative. It addresses the following seven areas:

- site
- water
- energy
- health

- materials
- equity
- beauty

BuiltGreen

A BUILT GREEN home is designed to work as a system or a sum of its parts. These third-party certified homes promise resource efficiency, comfort (i.e. less temperature variation, good ventilation), minimized waste from home building, home health (i.e. low-emitting products such as low-VOC paints) and durability. The system is focused on the following five areas:

- Resource efficiency
- More comfortable home
- Healthy home – healthy environment
- Durability
- Enhanced and retained value

Energy efficiency

ENERGY STAR for New Homes

Most appliance consumers would be familiar with the ENERGY STAR label. In addition to being the leading energy-efficient appliance certification, ENERGY STAR also offers a home certification focused on evaluating energy efficiency, which is backed by the federal department Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) and verified by a third party.

EnerGuide

Like ENERGY STAR, EnerGuide is also an NRCan-backed program that started as a measure of appliance efficiency, which has since entered the field of home certification (also with a focus on energy efficiency). Certified third-party energy advisors measure the energy efficiency of a home on a 0 to 100 scale with 0 being serious air leakage, no insulation and high-energy consumption. A score of 100 signifies an airtight, well-insulated home that doesn't require energy to be purchased.

R-2000

This voluntary standard promotes energy efficiency, indoor air tightness quality and environmental responsibility in home construction. It's administered by NRCan, but delivered through a network of third-party evaluators.

Specialized

Passive House

Considered the highest energy standard in regards to heating energy consumption, passive house certification focuses on a home's insulation properties and its ability to heat through passive solar gain. Passive Houses' new PHIUS+ rating system is a third-party certification system.

2.0 BUYING A GREEN HOME

2.1 HOW TO BUY A GREEN HOME

Buying a home is a major life decision. One that involves both emotions and finances. And purchasing a green home adds yet one more layer of decision-making to the mix—environmental sustainability. Read this overview to get an idea of the home buying process, then proceed to the other pages of this guide for all the details.

To buy or not to buy?

Buying isn't all it's made out to be. According to real estate investor Michael Bluejay, "Most people think the benefit in buying is to 'stop throwing your money away on rent,' but in fact the equity you build from buying is mostly offset by the money you will 'throw away' on taxes, insurance, maintenance, and mortgage interest, which renters don't pay. The real benefit from buying is that you *freeze your monthly payment for 15 to 30 years*, and then you stop paying it altogether."

So before doing anything, ask yourself if you really are ready to purchase a home. Though you can never be 100 per cent sure, it's worth taking the time now to figure out whether home ownership is right for you. The decision to rent or buy is a complicated one. There's a strong argument against buying, even as an investment, so it's worth understanding the whole picture first.

For more on this topic, proceed to section 2.1:

Is Home Ownership Right For You?

Figure out what you can afford

When deciding on your home buying budget, a good rule of thumb is to multiply your annual household income by three to determine how expensive a home you can afford. (e.g. $100,000 household annual income x 3 = $300,000 home). However, if you're in a good financial position (strong credit, low-debt, high savings) you're in a better position to buy a more expensive home.

If your household income is too low and home prices too high, you have a few options, such as reducing your expectations in a home or buying a larger home than your needs dictate and renting out a part of it.

For more on this topic, proceed to section 2.2:

Home much home can you afford?

Decide what you want

Now that you know what you can afford, you can start thinking of the fun stuff: what you want. It's important to accurately assess what your needs and wants are. Come up with a list of must-haves and nice-to-haves so that when you start looking for a home, you've already figured out more or less what you're looking for, which will likely lead to better decision-making because you've thought the decision through.

Green home buyers will want to consider a number of issues that a conventional home buyer normally wouldn't, such as the economy of resource use, the size of the home's footprint, and the durability of the home.

For more on this topic, proceed to section 2.3:

Green Home Buyer's checklist

Finding an agent

An experienced real estate agent can help find the best home for you, and it doesn't cost you anything to get one (the seller pays the agent's fee). Ask your family and friends for referrals. Once you decide what area you're looking in, find an agent who specializes in green real estate for that area. Ideally, you'll get referred to a green real estate specialist for the particular area you're looking in, but if only one of the two, you're still doing well.

An agent has access to the Multiple Listing Service (MLS) database, which can greatly help you in your search, but bear in mind that agents have multiple clients so can only spend so much time searching around for you. It's also important to note that agents reap a higher commission when you purchase a more expensive home, so it's a good idea to take a step back and assess your decision as objectively as possible.

For more on this topic, proceed to section 2.4:

How to find an agent

Conducting a search

Tell the agent what area you want to live in, how big of a loan you can get and give them your wish list of features to conduct the search with. Then use that information so you can search yourself.

Whether you choose to use an agent or not, it's a good idea to search around for homes by yourself since more and more homes are being listed on the Internet, both those listed on MLS and not. The Internet opens up a whole market of For Sale by Owner homes that aren't on MLS and also gives you more control over the home buying process.

Look around at homes

Though home listings can have detailed descriptions and many photos, to really know a home you have to go look at it. So have a look at a few homes that suit your needs. Take your time in each one inspecting them thoroughly before deciding whether it's right for you.

Make an offer

Before making your offer on a home, get the answers to the following:

- how long has it been on the market?
- how much have similar homes been selling for?
- how flexible is the seller?

You may make an offer conditional upon inspection, obtaining financing or selling your home. Then you can put down the deposit (to be used if the offer becomes firm, otherwise you get your money back).

After you've decided on the right home, provide the vendor with an Offer to Purchase, or Agreement of Purchase and Sale. To be on the safe side have your lawyer look at it before presenting it to the vendor.

Find a lawyer/notary

Find a lawyer/notary who specializes in real estate. Claire Sibonney of HGTV recommends finding one that you have a good rapport with since the lawyer/notary's role is part advisor, part confidant.

Make sure to ask about closing fees, which can add a substantial amount to the purchase price of a home, from 1.5 per cent to even 2.5 per cent for a brand new home.

Home inspection

Just as it's important to find an experienced real estate agent, it's important to find a qualified, registered home inspector. As always, it's best to get a referral, but if you don't hear about an inspector from someone you trust, ask around, remembering to inquire about the inspector's experience and professional qualifications. The Canadian Association of Home & Property Inspectors is a self-regulating professional body of home inspectors in Canada that's recognized for its high standard of home inspectors. Though they are self-regulating, membership in the CAHPI at least assures that the inspector meets or exceeds the Association's standards of practice.

The mortgage

Once your offer is accepted, visit your lender, who will complete the mortgage application. According to the CMHC, you may be asked to get a property appraisal, land survey and title insurance.

Closing

After taking care of the property inspection, appraisal, survey and insurance you're now ready to close the deal. Here's where you pay out the down payment and sign the paperwork. And with the deal finalized, the home is yours!

Sources:

Homebuying Step by Step

The Home Buyer's Guide

Basics of Buying a House

First Time Home Buyer's Guide

Canadian Association of Home & Property Inspectors

2.2 IS HOME OWNERSHIP RIGHT FOR YOU?

Though owning a home is generally a wise investment decision, it's not a given in everyone's situation. Renting does have a number of advantages. Arm yourself with the necessary knowledge to make an informed decision by going through this article and, if you still don't know where you stand, do some further reading using the sources listed at the end of this page.

Advantages of renting

- Avoid most home maintenance responsibilities, such as landscaping, snow removal and repairs.
- Avoid the hassle of finding and buying a home.
- If you have low rent, you could be in a better financial position than buying.
- If you're at a point in your life in which you're moving around—or would like the freedom to move around—it's a lot easier to rent than having to sell your home and move multiple times.
- If looking in an area that has a large inventory of rental homes on the market, you're more likely to get what you want by renting than buying.
- Pay no property taxes, down payment or closing costs (though a security deposit may be required).
- Fixed monthly expenditures, unlike home ownership where a major repair can set you back thousands of dollars in one month.
- Moving is relatively easy.
- No long-term commitment, which saves the stress of legal and financial concerns, and allows the freedom to leave rather quickly.

Disadvantages of renting

- Miss out on the opportunity to gain equity in your home.

- Little or no ability to expand the house as your family grows or even to renovate.
- Rent can increase when demand exceeds supply or due to inflation.
- Renting often does not provide the freedom to use the home however you want, such as owning a pet or making noise.
- No access to tax benefits like income tax deductions on loan interest.
- Lose out on the stability of owning a home (especially important to retirees).
- Renting is not as conducive to a stable lifestyle as home ownership.
- Having to deal with landlords.
- Lack of incentive to buy a renewable energy system or upgrade the home with green features.

Is home ownership right for you?

If you've worked through the rent vs. buy equation and have decided that renting is not for you, the next step is to assess whether or not home ownership is right for you.

- Do you have a stable income?
- Do you have good enough financial management skills to handle home ownership?
- Do you plan on staying put for more than five years?
- Can you handle the costs of mortgage payments, repairs and other maintenance? It's recommended that not more than one-third of your income go towards housing-related costs (to assess the financial aspect of buying or renting try out the New York Times' Buy-Rent Calculator).
- Do you have enough time to maintain the home?

If you've answered yes to those questions, congratulations, you're ready to purchase a home! For the green home buyer, however, additional questions need to be asked.

- Can you handle any potential extra costs associated with buying a green home and are you willing to absorb those extra costs because the benefit of owning a green home is greater?

- Will the added costs of green home ownership payback in a time horizon that you're comfortable with, given rising utility rates?
- Can you get loans and rebates for purchasing a green home or renewable energy system for your home?

Sources:

Renting vs. Buying: The Realities of Home Ownership

Buying vs. Renting a Home?

Buy or Rent? Pros and Cons

Top 5 Advantage and Disadvantages to Owning Your Own Home

2.3 HOW MUCH HOME CAN YOU AFFORD?

The overview presented a general rule of thumb to decide how much home you can afford, and now it's time to accurately budget. Lenders in Canada follow two simple rules outlined by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Canada's national housing agency, to determine the size of mortgage you qualify for:

PITH – monthly housing costs should not exceed 32 per cent of your gross monthly household income. These costs consist of monthly mortgage payments—principal and interest—property taxes and heating expenses (Principal, interest, taxes, heating=PITH).

TDS – Monthly debt should be less than 40 per cent of gross monthly income. This includes PITH from the previous rule in addition to other debt payments, such as credit card payments and car loans. This figure is referred to as Total Debt Service or TDS ratio.

Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's "Are you Financially Ready" is a complete resource for figuring out home much of a home you can afford. Use their home affordability calculator and other budgeting tools to calculate your monthly household expenses and debt load to determine what you can afford.

Costs of buying a home

Be prepared for a bunch of upfront costs when buying a home. Even if opting for a low down payment of 5 per cent you'll still have to fork out several thousand dollars between home inspection fees to title insurance before you get the keys to the house. And after unlocking the door to your new home you still face a number of other costs such as gardening equipment, decorations, repairs and moving expenses.

Use this home purchase cost estimate worksheet to sort out what you'll need to pay and plan accordingly. If you want to add sustainability modifications, such as solar panels or a composting toilet, to your home, remember to add those in to your total home cost on the worksheet.

Though buying a home is expensive, you may qualify for rebates (and green homes qualify for even more rebates than conventional homes).

Tax rebates and incentives

- The federal government's Home Buyers' Plan lets you withdraw up to $25,000 from your RRSP to buy or build a home, which gives you 15 years to repay that amount tax-free. Visit the Canada Revenue Agency for more details.
- When purchasing an energy-efficient home you could also qualify for a 10 per cent mortgage loan insurance premium refund and extended amortization (if using CMHC-insured financing). Visit CMHC Green Home for more details.
- Look into additional energy-efficiency incentives at the NRCan Office of Energy Efficiency's Financial Assistance page.

What to do if you can't afford a home?

If after running through the previous exercises you've found that you cannot afford a home, or cannot afford the type of home you want, you have a few options:

- Improve your financial position by saving up, spending less and paying off loans.
- Lower your expectations in a home or look at a cheaper location to live.
- Buy a larger home than your needs dictate (f you can finance it securely) and rent out a part of it to help pay the mortgage and expenses.
- Buy a home as an income property while you rent (or live with family) to save up to buy the home you desire.
- Build your own home or take part in a program in which you can assist in the building.

Assess your credit

Before lenders will approve your mortgage they'll check your credit history to determine how you've used credit in the past and if you're a risk to them

or not. Request a copy of your credit report from one of Canada's two main credit-reporting agencies: TransUnion or Equifax. They will charge you a small fee for this service.

If you're in no rush to buy, it's a wise idea to improve your credit rating in advance of buying a home so that when the time comes to buy, lenders will look more favourably upon you.

If you have no credit rating at all, you can establish a rating by getting a credit card, making some small purchases then paying them off immediately upon receiving the monthly statement.

If you have poor credit, it's worth talking to a credit counsellor. The Credit Counselling Society offers free credit counselling, bankruptcy and debt consolidation help via phone or online chat. Give them a call at 1-888-527-8999 or visit them online at nomoredebts.org. The good news is that most negative credit history, even bankruptcy, falls off your file after seven years.

Apply for pre-approval

Contact your bank or mortgage broker for pre-approval. By taking this step you'll know how much you can afford before you go through the process of buying a home. Decide what kind of mortgage you want (i.e. open or closed). Make sure you do a full needs-analysis with your lender to figure out what's right for you.

Once pre-approved you'll receive a limited-time written confirmation, approving you for a fixed interest rate. According to CMHC, however, a pre-approved mortgage doesn't actually guarantee being approved for a mortgage loan. When meeting for a pre-approval, bring your personal documentation and proof of salary, assets and debts with you.

2.4 HOW TO FIND A GREEN REAL ESTATE AGENT

Real estate is a competitive business, which means agents have to compete for their clients. Just as they work to find their next client (that they hope will turn into repeat business and a positive testimonial), you need to work to find the right real estate agent (one that you feel comfortable with to guide you through the whole process of buying or selling a home). How do you choose with so many to pick from? As with any selection process, there's a few steps you can take to quickly narrow down your options. So take the time now to find the right person and you could prevent a lot of hassles down the road.

What agent to find

Finding an experienced agent who specializes in green real estate and in your particular area is ideal because they'll have the right mix of experience and knowledge to assist with your specific situation.

Of those three factors—experience, green homes and location specialization—you might get lucky and find someone with all three. If not, you'll have to weigh the relative importance of each.

How to find an agent

Referrals are always best. Ask friends and family if they know someone that they'd recommend. If you're lucky enough to get referred to a green home specialist from someone you trust, your task finding an agent could be a short one.

You can turn to the web for quick results. The National Association of Green Agents and Brokers maintains an online directory of green real estate agents in Canada. If a search on your area pulls up any listings, you can then start looking through those agents' websites.

It's a good idea to run a search on Google for "green real estate agents <your location>" (without the brackets: i.e. green real estate agents Calgary or green real estate agents Ontario). How high these agents' websites rank is

not necessarily an indicator of the agent's experience, popularity or number of homes sold, but is an indicator of their popularity on the Internet, and that fact alone means a lot in terms of how much visibility your home will get when listed.

You might not have any luck finding someone who specializes in green homes or in your specific area, so you'll need to take your search further afield. If in your search you come across a great agent, but who doesn't specialize in what you're looking for, don't hesitate to ask for a referral to one who does. You can also ask around at local agencies to come up with a list of agents' names.

Alternatively, if you have the time, Elizabeth Weintraub, Broker-Associate at Lyon Real Estate, recommends tracking for sale signs in the neighbourhood to see when they go up and when they're sold. You could also attend open houses to see agents in action and meet them in a casual environment rather than interviewing them.

Assessing an agent

Go through agents' marketing materials, websites and interview them, keeping an eye out to determine whether the agent is puffing themselves up or not. Do they really have the experience they claim to have?

A look through their websites might help you discover the answer. See how many listings they have. If they do have a lot, look for the fine print to see whether those are actually their own listings or if they belong to other agents in the office. Also check to see if they advertise on other home listing websites, which would increase the visibility of your home for sale.

An agent with a high traffic website is akin to an agent who advertises a lot in print. The more visible they are, the more visibility your home will get when for sale. It's also possible that if they're a highly visible agent, however, they're really busy and don't have much time for you. They may have an assistant who will do most of the work, which isn't necessarily a bad thing if the assistant is knowledgeable enough.

Assessing how much an agent knows and how much experience they have doesn't always equate to the same thing. According to the Canadian Real Estate Association, "A freshly-licensed REALTOR can do a wonderful job

and will have up-to-date training; those in the business longer bring more practical experience."

Clarifying their qualifications

A "REALTOR®" and a "real estate agent" are not the same thing. The former are real estate agents licensed by the Canadian Real Estate Association (CREA). A REALTOR® is a real estate agent, but a real estate agent who is not a member of CREA is not a REALTOR®. To be a member in CREA means that the agent is committed to the REALTOR® Code of ethics. REALTORs are also the only legitimate people who can list your property for sale on MLS®.

The Real Estate Institute of Canada (REIC) maintains its own set of designations and accreditations. If you see the FRI designation beside an agent's name, you'll know that they're accredited by REIC. Any person holding a Real Estate Institute of Canada designation is bound by a strict code of ethics," according to the REIC website. "Further, REIC members are encouraged to demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning.

The FRI (Fellow of the Real Estate Institute) designation is considered by REIC to be the gold standard for real estate sales. This designation means that, at a minimum, the agent has at least five years of licensed real estate sales or marketing experience and has taken a few courses and gone through an interview process. Though it can set agents apart, there's a lot of difference in experience between an agent with five years of experience and one with 35 years of experience. These designations help, but in the end you just have to make the call yourself.

Interviewing an agent

If you get a positive impression based on an agent's marketing materials, proceed to call them up for an interview.

If an agent claims to have expertise selling green homes or selling in a particular area, ask them about those transactions and for references to those clients.

Ask specific questions about the market for your home. Weintraub recommends getting the details on important numbers like median prices, days on market and inventory. If their response offers little specifics and a lot of generalities, it could very easily point to a lack of knowledge and/or experience.

To assure a fast sale you'll want to ask agents about their marketing plans and how they've sold homes like yours in the past. Also, feel free to ask them details about how they operate, what their fees are, how negotiable they are, etc. CREA states, "A good REALTOR® makes forms available to you before you are required to sign them. Ask to see agency disclosure, listing agreement, seller disclosure."

It's always possible that things may not work out between you and your agent, so ask about the terms of the listing agreement and whether you can cancel it.

Call up an agent's references up and ask them what their experience with the agent was like. If the response was negative, don't hesitate to keep on looking. There are plenty of agents out there eager for your business. If all sounds good to you at this point you can enter an agreement with the agent and move on to selling or buying your home.

Further reading:

- howrealtorshelp.ca: 10 questions to ask when hiring a REALTOR®
- About.com: How to Find, Interview and Hire a Real Estate Agent
- About.com: Fluffery of Agents
- Real Estate Institute of Canada: Designations

2.5 GREEN HOME BUYING CHECKLIST

With so many variables to consider and options to choose from, buying a home is likely the most complicated purchasing decision you'll ever have to make. And choosing a green home demands even more consideration. It's unlikely to find a home that satisfies every single need, so try to find one that accommodates most of your needs, right now. As you go through this list, keep in mind that needs change, so what is important to you today may not be 10 years from now.

(download PDF for viewing on tablet/e-book reader or printing)

Style of home/type of community

> Do you want a house, townhouse, mobile home or condo?> If house, detached, semi-detached, duplex?

> Do you want to live in a cohousing, ecovillage or another type of intentional community?

Basic features

> How large of a home do you want (in sq. ft. or square m)> How many bedrooms do you want?

> How many bathrooms do you want? How many pieces?> Do you need a driveway? If so, single, double (or larger)?

> Do you need a garage, carport or none? If so, single, double (or larger)?

> What size lot do you want?

> How big of a front and backyard do you want? (fenced?)

> Do you want a fireplace or other amenities?

> Do you want a patio? If so, how big?

> Do you need wheelchair access or other special accommodation?

> Do you want other buildings such as a shed or barn?

> How much storage do you need?

>Do you have animals? If so, what are their needs?

> Do you need heating and air conditioning?

> What kind of flooring would you like? (i.e. hardwood, tile, carpet)

> How much natural light do you need?

> Do you need any special rooms, such as a workshop?

> Do you want a special view? If so, of what?

Green home features

> How do you want to heat and cool the home? (i.e. wood-burning oven, geothermal, solar)

> How do you want to heat your water? (i.e. solar hot water)> How will you deal with water and waste? (i.e. rainwater harvesting, graywater, composting toilets)

> How efficient do you need your fixtures and fittings to be? (i.e. low-flow toilets, showerheads and faucets)

> Are the home's building materials a concern? (i.e. FSC-certified wood, bamboo, cork)

> Is the home outfitted with ENERGY STAR appliances?

> How much of a footprint are you willing to live with (i.e. was the home built on environmentally sensitive land? What materials was it built with and how much waste did it produce?)

> How long do you want your home to last? Was it made with durable building materials? (i.e. earth)

> Do you want a greenhouse?

> Do you want water-efficient landscaping (xeriscaping).

> Do you want property that has been kept organic / non-toxic pest control (how long has the land been like that?)

> Do you want to live in a low, medium or high-density neighbourhood?

Home health and indoor air quality

> How important is indoor air quality to you? (i.e. enhanced air ventilation, high quality filters, occupancy sensors)

> Is the home you're looking at located near an electromagnetic source such as power lines, power plant or highways that will disrupt your health?

> Does it matter if the home has (or has had) mould or a pest infestation?

Comfort

> How well insulated of a home do you want? (better insulation means less drafts and less heating/cooling)

> How much quietude do you need? (are there highways or airports nearby? Is the home soundproof?)

> How much natural light do you require? (i.e. big windows, skylights)

Technology

> Do you need to be close to a cell tower (important if you don't plan on getting a home phone)?

> How far are you from the Internet broadband server?> If located far away from these services, can you get satellite?

> Is the home wired with fibre-optic and audio cables?

Additional work

> Are you willing to do renovation? If so, how much will that cost and will it be worth your time to do it or find a place that's ready to move in.

> Are you willing to replace the roof and appliances soon? (when will they need to be replaced?)

Ongoing costs

> How old of a home are you willing to purchase?> How much can you pay in routine maintenance costs?

> How much can you pay in utilities (water, gas, hydro)> How much can you pay in taxes?

Location

> How close do you want to be to shopping and community amenities (i.e. library, basketball court, swimming pool)?

> Do you want public transportation to get to those amenities?

> How far are you willing to be from work? (if far away can you get another job or telecommute?)

> If telecommuting, how big of an office space do you need?

> How far are you willing to be from friends and family?

> Are you willing to change your dentist, church, yoga class, health club, etc. to be closer to your home?

> Is it important to have emergency facilities nearby (hospital, fire station)?

> How much traffic and other detractions (i.e. garbage dump, nuclear power plant) are you willing to put up with?

> Do you need good access to open space, parks and wilderness? (How far are you willing to go?)

> If there is land near the home you're interested in that's undeveloped, does it matter to you what is built on that land?

> If you have children or pets are you OK with being in a high-traffic area? What about other safety concerns such as crime?

Outlook

> Do you know what the government's plans for the neighbourhood are in the future (i.e. building a highway through it)? Are you OK with those plans?

> Does it matter to you whether businesses and government are investing in the community or are stores being shut down and boarded up?

> Do you know whether people are moving into or out of the neighbourhood? Does that matter to you?

Other considerations

> Do you plan on having kids? (will you need additional space or are any of your children moving out soon?)

> Would you need a home that can accommodate people of all ages?

> Do you like having guests? If so, how many, and how will you accommodate them?

Sources:

Homebuying Wishlist

First Time Home Buyer's Guide

Which Home is Right For You?

LEED For Homes Rating System

3.0 SELLING A GREEN HOME

3.1 HOW TO SELL A GREEN HOME

Selling a green home is much like selling a conventional home, with a few differences. This article will present both the general and specific tips you need to consider when selling your green home.

The first big decision every seller needs to make is whether to get represented by a realtor or opt to For Sale By Owner (FSBO). Do you want to save the commission and do the extra work selling it yourself or take on a realtor to do the work for you. If represented by a realtor, look around to see if there's a green real estate specialist in your area since they'll know the specifics about green homes and what the market is like for them. This overview of the selling process assumes a buyer is being represented by an agent. For specific information on selling a home as an FSBO, visit http://www.forsalebyowner.ca/sellers-guide.

Upgrades

Though a massive solar PV system would make your home more attractive as a green home, the price hike doesn't. You have to know your market and whether buyers can afford the increased cost. This is where taking on a knowledge green realtor will help. They'll be able to tell you whether or not the market can support the upgrade you plan on purchasing.

If you need to replace an outdated or broken appliance go for the most energy-efficient option while staying within a reasonable budget.

Keep records

Keep receipts, warranty information and proof of cost savings for any purchases you make since potential buyers may want to see them, suggests Maggie Baxter of Ecohearth. Since buyers may not look out for these details, it helps to point them out by displaying these papers at an open house so that they realize the home's true value.

Renovate

Ask yourself how much hassle you're willing to put up with to renovate your home and whether you can recoup those costs once selling. The basics should at least be considered: painting walls and refurbishing floors.

According to home renovations guide Lee Wallender, kitchens and bathrooms should be the number one remodelling priority. Typically, with conventional homes it's suggested to focus on appearance over function. A home's appearance has a subconscious effect on buyers, which will impress them far more than installing a new water heater. But here again, it's important to know your market. Though appearances still have a great effect on green home buyers you have to have enough sustainable components to warrant calling your home a green home. If not, you may just want to consider those energy efficiency upgrades before doing anything else.

Staging the home

The benefits of staging are many. According to Home Staging Online, they include:

- An updated, newer look
- Appeals to more people
- Positive first impression
- Impression that the home is clean and well-maintained
- Home appears larger with less clutter
- Highlights special features of the home
- Better images for MLS, web, video, and print
- Positioning small areas, porch, alcove, patio as prime living space
- Positive return on investment
- Faster sale
- More showings and offers
- Higher appraised value and sale price

Of all the work that goes into preparing a home for sale, staging can be the most time consuming and tedious, which is why many people choose to outsource the job. Talk it over with your real estate agent when deciding whether to stage the home yourself or hire someone.

The main benefit of doing it yourself is the obvious fact that you save money, but you also save the hassle of finding someone, hiring them and having them hanging around the house. The drawbacks are that you don't benefit from the professional expertise and you won't get the objectivity that an outside source will bring to the job when making important decisions about what stays and what goes.

If you want to hire a professional, search the directory at Certified Staging Professionals and locate one that is resource efficient. Ask them how much they're able to reuse current furniture and what percentage of their staging inventory is recycled (i.e. purchased from second-hand / consignment

shops or furniture rental companies). If you're doing it yourself, read the next page in this guide: How to stage a green home.

Listing/marketing the home

Hire a professional photographer to take a series of photos that you can list online as a virtual tour. Narrow down to your best shots that showcase your home as well as possible.

A recent poll on Comfree found that 62 per cent of people start their home search by surfing the net. So whether you go through an agent or choose to sell yourself, it's a wise decision to post your home for sale on the Internet. If you have the budget and time, post on as many sites as possible and consider print sources such as the newspaper, real estate magazines and direct mail. If you have to limit your promotional strategy, target green home buyers by posting your ad with us. With our 100% satisfaction guarantee, you have nothing to lose. Just as bird watchers frequent a specific spot when looking out for the rare Harlequin Duck, to find the specific breed of home buyers you'll need to look for them in the right place.

For more on how to sell a home, watch this video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=MiXqqVcz5k0

Further reading:

How To Prepare Your House For Sale

Green Home Sellers' Guide: How to Sell an Eco-Friendly House

How to Renovate Your House Before Sale

How to Stage Your Home for a Sale

Home Marketing Tips – How to Market Your House

3.2 HOW TO FIND A GREEN REAL ESTATE AGENT

Real estate is a competitive business, which means agents have to compete for their clients. Just as they work to find their next client (that they hope will turn into repeat business and a positive testimonial), you need to work to find the right real estate agent (one that you feel comfortable with to guide you through the whole process of buying or selling a home). How do you choose with so many to pick from? As with any selection process, there's a few steps you can take to quickly narrow down your options. So take the time now to find the right person and you could prevent a lot of hassles down the road.

What agent to find

Finding an experienced agent who specializes in green real estate and in your particular area is ideal because they'll have the right mix of experience and knowledge to assist with your specific situation.

Of those three factors—experience, green homes and location specialization—you might get lucky and find someone with all three. If not, you'll have to weigh the relative importance of each.

How to find an agent

Referrals are always best. Ask friends and family if they know someone that they'd recommend. If you're lucky enough to get referred to a green home specialist from someone you trust, your task finding an agent could be a short one.

You can turn to the web for quick results. The National Association of Green Agents and Brokers maintains an online directory of green real estate agents in Canada. If a search on your area pulls up any listings, you can then start looking through those agents' websites.

It's a good idea to run a search on Google for "green real estate agents <your location>" (without the brackets: i.e. green real estate agents Calgary

or green real estate agents Ontario). How high these agents' websites rank is not necessarily an indicator of the agent's experience, popularity or number of homes sold, but is an indicator of their popularity on the Internet, and that fact alone means a lot in terms of how much visibility your home will get when listed.

You might not have any luck finding someone who specializes in green homes or in your specific area, so you'll need to take your search further afield. If in your search you come across a great agent, but who doesn't specialize in what you're looking for, don't hesitate to ask for a referral to one who does. You can also ask around at local agencies to come up with a list of agents' names.

Alternatively, if you have the time, Elizabeth Weintraub, Broker-Associate at Lyon Real Estate, recommends tracking for sale signs in the neighbourhood to see when they go up and when they're sold. You could also attend open houses to see agents in action and meet them in a casual environment rather than interviewing them.

Assessing an agent

Go through agents' marketing materials, websites and interview them, keeping an eye out to determine whether the agent is puffing themselves up or not. Do they really have the experience they claim to have?

A look through their websites might help you discover the answer. See how many listings they have. If they do have a lot, look for the fine print to see whether those are actually their own listings or if they belong to other agents in the office. Also check to see if they advertise on other home listing websites, which would increase the visibility of your home for sale.

An agent with a high traffic website is akin to an agent who advertises a lot in print. The more visible they are, the more visibility your home will get when for sale. It's also possible that if they're a highly visible agent, however, they're really busy and don't have much time for you. They may have an assistant who will do most of the work, which isn't necessarily a bad thing if the assistant is knowledgeable enough.

Assessing how much an agent knows and how much experience they have doesn't always equate to the same thing. According to the Canadian Real Estate Association, "A freshly-licensed REALTOR can do a wonderful job

and will have up-to-date training; those in the business longer bring more practical experience."

Clarifying their qualifications

A "REALTOR®" and a "real estate agent" are not the same thing. The former are real estate agents licensed by the Canadian Real Estate Association (CREA). A REALTOR® is a real estate agent, but a real estate agent who is not a member of CREA is not a REALTOR®. To be a member in CREA means that the agent is committed to the REALTOR® Code of ethics. REALTORs are also the only legitimate people who can list your property for sale on MLS®.

The Real Estate Institute of Canada (REIC) maintains its own set of designations and accreditations. If you see the FRI designation beside an agent's name, you'll know that they're accredited by REIC. Any person holding a Real Estate Institute of Canada designation is bound by a strict code of ethics," according to the REIC website. "Further, REIC members are encouraged to demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning.

The FRI (Fellow of the Real Estate Institute) designation is considered by REIC to be the gold standard for real estate sales. This designation means that, at a minimum, the agent has at least five years of licensed real estate sales or marketing experience and has taken a few courses and gone through an interview process. Though it can set agents apart, there's a lot of difference in experience between an agent with five years of experience and one with 35 years of experience. These designations help, but in the end you just have to make the call yourself.

Interviewing an agent

If you get a positive impression based on an agent's marketing materials, proceed to call them up for an interview.

If an agent claims to have expertise selling green homes or selling in a particular area, ask them about those transactions and for references to those clients.

Ask specific questions about the market for your home. Weintraub recommends getting the details on important numbers like median prices, days on market and inventory. If their response offers little specifics and a

lot of generalities, it could very easily point to a lack of knowledge and/or experience.

To assure a fast sale you'll want to ask agents about their marketing plans and how they've sold homes like yours in the past. Also, feel free to ask them details about how they operate, what their fees are, how negotiable they are, etc. CREA states, "A good REALTOR® makes forms available to you before you are required to sign them. Ask to see agency disclosure, listing agreement, seller disclosure."

It's always possible that things may not work out between you and your agent, so ask about the terms of the listing agreement and whether you can cancel it.

Call up an agent's references up and ask them what their experience with the agent was like. If the response was negative, don't hesitate to keep on looking. There are plenty of agents out there eager for your business. If all sounds good to you at this point you can enter an agreement with the agent and move on to selling or buying your home.

Further reading:

- howrealtorshelp.ca: 10 questions to ask when hiring a REALTOR®
- About.com: How to Find, Interview and Hire a Real Estate Agent
- About.com: Fluffery of Agents
- Real Estate Institute of Canada: Designations

image: photoillustrator.eu via photoXpress

3.3 HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH A GREEN HOME

With most people beginning their home search online, pictures have become your first sales pitch. The human eye is drawn to photos before it notices text so you have a great opportunity to sell your home faster and for the price you want just by putting in the effort to take quality photos. Use these tips to learn some of the tricks that architectural photographers use to get eye-catching, stunning visuals that highlight a home's best features.

Choose your subject

Since the subject of an empty room is whatever you see in your viewfinder (excluding 360 degree shots, which are a good idea to take), the New York Institute of Photography suggests carefully choosing the room's most interesting angle with an eye for visually engaging details like a vivid painting or solid oak desk. Just make sure to avoid photographing a bright window since that can distract the eye and lead to overexposure. An alternative is to shoot at twilight or to lower the curtains. For the exterior avoid focusing on the garage and play around to find your home's best angle.

Emphasize features

If you have a particularly nice feature like a chandelier or fireplace, you'll want to emphasize it by filling the frame with it. To get viewers to really pay attention to a nice desk, place a vase with bright flowers on it and to exhibit a striking painting illuminate it with a lamp.

Renewable energy systems have some sizzling sales potential. Remember to take photos of your systems on a day when they're working. For a wind turbine, use a longer than average shutter speed to capture the spin of the blades. Green home buyers like nature. Capture the natural beauty of your lot and the outside view. Even a photo or two of your wildlife neighbours would help (unless they're bears!).

Declutter

Decluttering is a big part of the staging process (from the previous step of this guide) but is worth mentioning again here. It's imperative to remove clutter. Having too much stuff in a photo will distract the viewer. So remove furniture, pillows, waste baskets and surface clingers like phones and computers. And never include people or animals in your photos. You want potential buyers to envision themselves living in your home.

Minimize distractions

Crooked angles are a serious visual distraction. To correct the problem of unaligned walls, shoot straight on. Architectural photographers call it "one-point perspective," which means the horizontal and vertical lines run completely horizontally or vertically. Do this by placing your camera on a tripod and aligning it so that it's fully parallel to the wall that it's pointed at. And shoot at child's eye view to avoid getting too much ceiling in the shot. For most adults this would be between waist and eye level.

Equipment

If you don't have a quality camera, ask a friend if you can borrow theirs. You don't need state-of-the-art equipment nowadays to get some nice looking shots. Basic consumer models that cost just a few hundred dollars can take spectacular photos.

Wide angle photos make a room look bigger than they really are. Standard point-and-shoot cameras can take a fairly wide shot, but they're not the same as using a single lens reflex camera (SLR/DSLR) with a wide-angle lens. But be aware that wide-angle lenses aren't always the best option. They do make a room look bigger than it is, but they can also distort images. In some cases it may be better to just take two images of a room instead of one. If doing so, keep one common element in the two photos, such as a painting.

One last piece of gear you'll need is a tripod. As mentioned previously, they're essential to lining your photos up straight.

Lighting

Light ranks as the number one concern for photographers. According to *How to Photograph Buildings and Interiors*, the way light hits an object triggers intense emotional reactions in our conditioned brains. "Harsh, direct sunlight strongly emphasizes certain patterns and textures that can suggest boldness or power, while the diffused light of an early morning sky just before sunrise softens and embellishes whatever it illuminates."

With the changing seasons, weather and time of day, light is in a constant state of flux. Two important variables to consider are cloudiness and time of day. Particularly for exterior shots, it's worth waiting to photograph on a partly cloudy day to reduce the intensity of sunlight. Bear in mind that rooms will look better at certain times, so study your house over time so you can pick the best times to shoot each room. If taking photos of the view capture some blue sky and clouds to add contrast to your pictures.

Photographer Ken Rockwell suggests timing your photography session for the magic hour, which isn't actually an hour, but 10 to 20 minutes after sundown to benefit from the nicest contrast and prettiest colours that nature has to give. "Show a home at magic hour and people want to live there," Rockwell writes, suggesting the importance of timing. "Show it in the day and you lose that power."

Further reading:

Wall Street Journal: How to Photograph Your For-Sale House

New York Institute of Photography: How to Photograph Interiors

How to Photograph Buildings and Interiors by Gerry Kopelow

Architectural Photography: Composition, Capture, and Digital Image Processing by Adrian Schulz

photo courtesy G A I L E (CC-BY-NC-SA)

3.4 HOW TO STAGE A GREEN HOME

In 2011, the Real Estate Staging Association studied 174 homes that were on the market for an average of 156 days before the homeowners gave up and hired a professional stager. After the homes were staged and relisted, they sold on average 42 days after staging (73 per cent less time). Since home staging plays such a major role in the sale of a home, the task is not to be taken lightly. Prepare to spend a good amount of time paying attention to fine details and make sure to stay on top of the job throughout the entire home selling process to ensure your hard work doesn't go to waste. All the effort will be well worth it. According to award-winning home stager Kate Hart, 87 per cent of buyers go online to look at pictures before even calling a realtor. So you're staging for two reasons: to impress buyers when they look at the home in person and in photos. And since the market for green homes is smaller than for conventional homes, making that great first impression is that much more important.

Depersonalize

Disconnect your home from your personal life by emotionally detaching from it and depersonalizing it, writes Elizabeth Weintraub, broker-associate at Lyon Real Estate. So pack up any personal items such as photos and family heirlooms and get rid of any particular smells (other than good ones such as baking cookies, which is encouraged!). This accomplishes two things, it prevents potential buyers from getting distracted and it helps them to envision themselves living there, not you.

Clean and declutter

According to the national HomeGain survey, cleaning and decluttering is the most highly recommended home improvement for sellers. At an average cost of $100 to $200, it is the cheapest, yet yields a home price increase of $1500 to $2000. With an ROI of 872 per cent, it's by far the highest return of any home improvement.

Deep clean the entire house, even the fireplace and stove. When doing so make sure to use environmentally-friendly and/or natural cleaning products. Keep these in the closet to show buyers that you green clean your home. This is especially important to buyers interested in a healthy home (which many green home buyers are) because there's a good possibility that they're sensitive or allergic to chemicals.

Get rid of anything you don't regularly use, otherwise pack it up and put it in storage. Since you're planning on moving anyways, this step will make the moving process that much easier. The cleaner and more organized you keep your home and belongings, the better impression the buyer will get.

Get rid of any excess furniture. A bit of emptiness makes the home appear larger and easier to move around. Try removing half your furniture then adjust from there. Remove small appliances from the kitchen and toiletries from the bathrooms. Also, make sure to keep closets rather empty to show how much storage space the home has.

Furnishing

Furnish spaces both inside and outside the house, such as patios and porches, to reinforce that all those spaces are usable.

Replace old furniture or use additional furniture rentals only where necessary. Wherever possible try to locate nearby furniture. Perhaps a neighbour has a table you can borrow? That way you can just carry it over rather than rent a truck that you have to drive some distance.

Repair

Fix that leaky tap and replace worn out weatherstripping. Home buyers will scrutinize the house closely so make sure everything is in full working order. Whether you decide to get into extensive renovations or not, at the minimum, paint the walls and front door (but avoid bright colours) and replace cracked tiles and worn out carpets.

Landscaping

Keep the lawn nicely mown and free of debris. Rake the leaves and make sure the flowerbeds are looking good. A buyer's first impression of a home happens before even stepping out of the car, so make sure the driveway, patio, sidewalk and walkways are well-maintained and clear of snow.

Additional tips

- Use the "one will do" rule when accessorizing. One painting on a wall shows off the room better than multiple ones.
- Open the blinds and curtains while showing the house.
- Open windows and doors to air the house out.
- Keep fresh flowers in vases.
- Keep the outside of your home well-lit to attract nighttime drive-by traffic.

For more on how to stage a home, watch this video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ec7QCZAxidY

Further reading:

Home Staging Checklist

How To Prepare Your House For Sale

15 Secrets of Home Staging

Real Estate Staging Association

3.5 HOW TO PRICE A GREEN HOME

Price is the all-important factor in most home buyers' minds. Overprice and your home could go stale after just two or three weeks. Underprice and you could lose out on some hard-earned dollars. In making this tough decision, however, it's better to underprice than overprice. If your home goes stale, you lose negotiating power, but if you undervalue your home it doesn't mean you'll get less for it since multiple bidders could bring the price up to its actual market value, meaning you haven't lost a thing.

A good first step that will take some of the guesswork out of pricing your home is to get an appraisal. Sure it'll set you back a few hundred dollars, but it's worth it because it gives you a good objective analysis to consider when coming up with the final number.

If you're using an agent, work with him or her to come up with your price. Factor in all the benefits of your home itself, such as size, location, energy efficiency, renewable energy systems and maintenance cost, as well as external factors like the housing market, other comparable home prices in the area and what school board your home falls in.

Analyze the market

You want to first compare listings and sales to come up with the right price for your home. According to broker-associate Elizabeth Weintraub, it's typically recommended to look at similar homes (within 10 per cent in size and similar age, desirability of location) in your neighbourhood (within about 0.5 km in most cases) that have been listed or are currently listed over the previous six-month period.

But with the green homes market being as small as it is relative to the total number of homes on the market, you'll have to broaden your search (unless you happen to be in a green home community or in an area with a disproportionately high number of green homes). You'll need to look farther out, over a longer time frame, at homes of a different size, at homes with different features, etc. Then you'll have to estimate how these differences would compare to the actual value of your home.

Also, have a look at expired and withdrawn listings to understand why they did not sell at the price they were listed (or sell at all). Compare the listing price to the sales price to get an idea of how much these homes had to be

reduced in price. Looking through these listings you'll be able to find a common thread between these homes and what factors caused them to not sell so you can prevent that from happening to you.

Valuing the green home premium

If there are no green homes for sale or homes that have been sold in your area, it would be more effective to just price out the value of a similar conventional home and adjust for the green premium than compare yours to a home that is too different. A July 2012 study of 1.6 million homes sold in California between 2007 and 2012 found that green-labelled homes sell for an average of 9 per cent more than their unlabelled equivalents. The results from this significant sample size echo the sales figures in Europe where "A-rated" green homes have been found to sell for an average of 10 per cent more.

The 9 or 10 per cent figure is just a reference point to consider when pricing your home. All kinds of variables come into play here, most importantly the consumer preferences of home buyers in your area. If there's a small demand for green homes, the premium drops. If there's a strong demand, it goes up. One basic way to gauge desire for energy efficiency is by knowing how many registered hybrid and electric vehicles there are in your city (assuming the buyer is from your city) since a correlation has been found between ownership of these cars and willingness to pay a premium for a green home. Unless you're willing to do the research yourself, this is where the help of a knowledgeable green real estate agent pays off.

Valuing renewable energy systems

A 2011 report by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) found that homes with PV systems go for about 3 to 4 per cent more than similar homes without solar panels. The Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory came up with similar findings, which showed a sales price increase of $3.90 to $6.40 per watt ($25,750 for a 5000 watt system).

NBER's report pointed to college grads and registered Prius owners as being the demographics most likely to pay the premium, but here as well it pays to know your market when adding this price in.

Calculate how much you paid for your system (installed) and take away any tax rebates. Based on these figures, that amount is approximately how much you can bump your price.

Buyer's or seller's market?

Once you've come up with an average sales price for comparable homes and made any necessary adjustment for the green home premium and any specific systems within the home, it's time to finalize your home's sales price. In a buyer's market, Weintraub recommends listing just below the average. "For comparison purposes, let's say the last three comparable sales in your neighbourhood were $150,000. In a buyer's market, your sales price might allow some wiggle room for negotiation but be strong enough (near the last comparable sale) to entice a buyer to tour your home. To sell in this market, you might need to price your home at $149,900, settling for $145,000."

In a seller's market you could get away with bumping your price by 10 per cent (in this example to $165,000) and if the market is neither buyer's nor seller's you could price your home according to the market trend."For example, if the last sale closed three months ago, but the median price has edged upwards of 1% per month, pricing at $154,500 would make sense," Weintraub writes.

With all these variables to keep in mind, pricing a home can seem like a purely mathematical exercise. If only it was that easy to come up with the "right" price. Unfortunately, there's a lot of subjectivity dictated by the market that you'll only find out about once your home actually sells. So you can only do your best by following these guidelines and hopefully you'll have guessed just right and end up making a quick sale.

Further reading:

Zoocasa: Zoopraisal (Free online home appraisal tool)
HowStuffWorks: How Selling a House Works
About.com: The Worst Home Selling Mistake

The National Bureau of Economic Research: Understanding the Solar Home Price Premium
Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory: An Analysis of the Effects of Residential Photovoltaic Energy Systems on Home Sales Prices in California

Image credits

Cover: Photo Dean (Creative Commons BY-NC-ND)

Page 4: Sarowen (Creative Commons BY-NC-ND)

Page 22: Unity Homes (© 2013)

Page 43: Photo Dean (Creative Commons BY-NC-ND)

Visit www.greenhomegnome.com regularly to keep up to date on the latest green home trends, product reviews and home performance and green living tips. And when you get a chance check out our sister site…

Greenhouse Gnome is your source for all that is greenhouse, delivered daily with garden gnome sensibility! You'll find everything you need to get your own greenhouse started, but beyond that you'll find inspiration. We're big believers in food DIY, some would say militant in fact! Of course you'll get all that warm and fuzzy gardening chatter here, but you'll also understand our world view about self-sufficiency—we've outsourced much of our lives; time to start insourcing, and no better place to start than food! Visit us at: www.greenhousegnome.com.