

Atlanta's Green Home Programs Explained

By Carl Seville, Seville Consulting

Anyone who hasn't been living under a rock for the last few years is aware of the growing green building movement, and chances are, they're a bit confused about what it all means. Until recently, the only green building program readily available in the Atlanta area was EarthCraft House, a program of the Greater Atlanta Home Builders and Southface Energy Institute. The EarthCraft House program trains builders and remodelers to make their homes more healthy, durable, efficient and sustainable. Developed in 1999 for new homes, EarthCraft House is now available in five states and includes renovation, multi-family, light commercial and neighborhood development initiatives.

While EarthCraft House is still the dominant green building program in the Atlanta area, others such as LEED for Homes and the National Association of Home Builders' (NAHB) National Green Building Program, both national rather than local programs, are beginning to make inroads. LEED for Homes, a program of the U.S. Green Building Council, has many similarities to EarthCraft House, and most projects seeking one certification can usually get both at the same time.

Another building certification, which has been around longer than any of the aforementioned programs, is ENERGY STAR, a building certification program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. ENERGY STAR homes are required to meet a minimum threshold of energy efficiency, which is 15 percent better than the standard building code. ENERGY STAR is now expanding beyond energy efficiency to include indoor air quality and water conservation, bringing it more in line with other green building programs.

HOW THIS AFFECTS CURRENT AND POTENTIAL HOME OWNERS

Anyone who lives in a home that is certified as EarthCraft House, LEED for Homes, ENERGY STAR or the National Green Building Standard will mostly likely have lower energy bills, more even heating and cooling, cleaner indoor air and overall improved comfort in their house. And, owners of these homes have an advantage when getting ready to sell. First Multiple Listing Service (FMLS) have green home features incorporated into its system, allowing homes for sale to be listed by EarthCraft House, LEED for Homes and ENERGY STAR certification, as well as the Home Energy Rating System (HERS) Index.

HERS is a method to quantify the efficiency of a house into a single number that purchasers can use to compare one house to another. The HERS index scale starts at 0 for a zero-energy house and goes to over 100. A typical old home will receive a HERS Index of about 125 to 150. The current energy code is 100, and an ENERGY STAR house is 85. Like a golf score, the lower the HERS number, the better. Many EarthCraft and LEED homes have scores in the range of 45 to 60, allowing for as much as twice as efficient as a standard home.

Buyers who are in the market for a new home or who are having one built should look for one of these certification programs to be assured their house will be as green as possible. Homes that are renovated or remodeled can be certified as an EarthCraft Renovation, provided it meets the minimum criteria of that program.

Home buyers should be wary of homes that are marketed as "built to" EarthCraft, LEED, ENERGY STAR or National Green Building Program specifications that are not tested and certified under these programs. Just because a home claims



Photos courtesy of Scott Wang Photography



to be "built to" certain standards, it does not mean the home actually has been certified to meet those standards. Certification includes independent third-party inspection and testing of each house to ensure it meets the program's requirements.

Adding to the mix are several green designations available for individual construction professionals. These include the Certified Green Professional (CGP) from NAHB, a different Green Certified Professional (GCP) from the National Association of the Remodeling Industry and LEED Accredited Professional (LEED AP) from the U.S. Green Building Council. These professionals have completed basic green construction training through these organizations, and while they may be very qualified at what they do, hiring them to design or build a project provides no guarantee that the project is truly green. Unless the consumer is very well educated, the only way to be assured of the performance of the house is to make sure it is certified through one or more of the available green building programs.

Buyers purchasing a new home should look for EarthCraft-, LEED- and/or ENERGY STAR-certified projects and insist on seeing the documentation and certificates to prove that it actually was certified. Additionally, hire a contractor who can provide the buyer with the available certifications, and make sure that the buyers actually gets them when the project is complete. Living in a certified green home will be more comfortable, less expensive to operate and very likely provide the home owner with higher value when he is ready to sell.

For More Info

EarthCraft House
www.earthcrafthouse.com

HERS
www.natresnet.org

ENERGY STAR
www.energystar.gov

LEED for Homes
www.greenhomeguide.org

National Green Building Program
www.nahbgreen.com

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