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USA Today: Make your house more green

POSTED BY ALLISON

AND SPEND LESS GREEN DOING IT!

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Building an eco-friendly house that doesn't cost a fortune is something architect Allison Ewing knows a lot about. She and husband Christopher Hays run Hays & Ewing Design Studio in Charlottesville, Va. They created several sustainable houses for low-income residents through the non-profit organization Habitat for Humanity, which

provides affordable housing to families in need. And because these homes are designed with efficiency in mind, utility bills are much lower, making them economical, too.

We asked Ewing to share practical, budget-friendly ways to improve your home's efficiency and carbon footprint:

Caulk your windows.

By preventing your house from letting air get in and out (aka "improving your envelope"), you can make a huge difference in electricity bills — by at least 10%. All you need is a \$5 tube of caulk to seal siding cracks and fill in around windows and any other spots where air is escaping. Look for a type that's suited to the materials you'll be applying it to (vinyl, wood) as well as your climate (humid, dry), and opt for a formulation low in volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which means it'll emit fewer potentially harmful chemicals.

Insulate your basement properly.

foundation wall system but provides insulation integrated to the system," she says. "This all falls under good envelope design."

Plant a rain garden.

Wetland plants such as cattails and irises, which cost less than \$10, actually filter out pollutants from rainwater, keeping those toxins from making the journey into local waterways. These plants also reduce erosion by slowing down the rainwater as it travels through the ground. However, this type of garden isn't appropriate for arid environments, where rainfall totals are low. Instead, opt to xeriscape, a water-conserving landscape technique that relies on native and drought-tolerant plants that don't require irrigation.

Buy wood "shorts."

Reclaimed wood flooring can be costly. But you can save a bundle if you buy "shorts," which are cheaper because they're shorter than the standard length and often are discarded. You also could choose "character-grade" wood. "It's knotty, with a lot more variation in color," Ewing says. Another option: Use pieces in random widths and lengths. Once they are stained the same color, they will have a nice, cohesive look.

Use trees strategically.

Plant deciduous trees or large bushes on the south side of your home to provide shade in the summer (cutting your air-conditioning bill) and to let in sun during the winter (cutting your heating bill). Although the cost depends on the types and quality of trees or bushes you plant, you can expect to spend at least \$100 for each. The south side is key because that's where most of the sunlight comes in during the day.

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