

Let the sun shine in

By Amanda N. Wegner for Capital Newspapers

Summer is a great time to make home improvements that deliver environmental, economic, emotional and physical health benefits. Adding a skylight or sun tunnel delivers all those pluses, in as little as a day.

“Interest in solar products seems to be increasing,” says Corey Ballweg, owner of Solar Expressions and Midtowne Construction, “especially sun tunnels. People want to bring more natural light into their homes.”

Basking in benefits

Quite simply, a skylight is like a window on the roof, allowing light to pour directly in a living space. Skylights are a good option if you want the ability to look up and see the sun, moon or stars, or need increased air flow with a venting skylight.

By comparison, a sun tunnel or solar tube captures sunlight on the roof of your home through a small dome and reflects the light down a tube. On the ceiling, the solar tube resembles a recessed light fixture, allowing all-natural light to enter the room. Solar tubes are particularly useful to light dark hallways, interior bathrooms, closets and other small spaces.

“The No. 1 benefit is you get natural light, and you don’t have to pay for it after the initial investment,” says Gina Richardson, manager of Brighter Concepts Ltd. Madison, a Solatube dealer.

There are other benefits to solar lighting as well. While research shows that most solar tubes and skylights filter out Vitamin D due to their protective coatings, natural daylight



enhances mood, reduces tooth decay, improves learning, and much more.

“Overall, you feel better in natural light,” says Richardson.

There are also energy savings, says

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AFTER

Sun tunnels or solar tubes capture sunlight from your roof and reflect it downward. Natural light is healthy and lessens the need for electric light.



More than carpet

Flooring alternatives for health, home

By Amanda N. Wegner for Capital Newspapers

While many homeowners like the warmth and comfort of carpeted floors, they are often hit with the harsh reality that carpet comes with a host of issues. Besides being difficult to clean, carpeted floors can also be a health concern. Bacteria, dust, dirt and odors can easily become imbedded in carpeting, beyond the reach of the vacuum.

“A lot of our clients have health problems with carpet,” says Melissa Clements, owner of Madison’s Eco-Friendly Flooring. “Carpet is like magnet for dust and other allergens, affecting indoor air quality. Even if you have the best vacuum and regularly clean the carpet, every time you walk on the carpet, you’re kicking up dust, dirt and other pollutants.”

Plus, the materials used in and on carpeting and during the installation process can affect human health. Even the EPA states: “Carpet emits volatile organic compounds, as do products that accompany carpet installation such as adhesives and padding. Some people report symptoms such as eye, nose and throat irritation; headaches; skin irritations; shortness of breath or cough; and fatigue, which they may associate with new carpet installation.”

But replacing carpeting with another type of flooring doesn’t have to be a large investment or time-consuming. There are hundreds of flooring options for all homeowners, projects and budgets. Here are a few to consider.

Cork flooring Many homeowners like carpeting for its insulating and acoustical (noise-dampening) values. But a healthier, more eco-friendly

alternative is cork flooring, says Clements.

Cork is temperature-neutral, meaning it doesn’t take on a room’s ambient air temperature or transfer heat or cold. Plus, it’s anti-static, so pet hair and dust won’t cling to it. And “It’s comfortable on bare feet,” says Clements.

Cork flooring comes from harvesting the outer bark of the cork oak tree; the same tree can be harvested numerous times.

Linoleum Not to be confused with vinyl, linoleum is natural flooring material made from linseed oil, flax, jute, cork powder, wood flour and natural pigments, pressed onto a backing. It’s available in an array of colors, and its durability makes it a good choice for high-traffic areas, including playrooms and workout rooms. Used with a moisture barrier, a floating linoleum floor is a great option for basements.

Hardwood flooring Solid hardwood has become the gold standard for flooring in homes. Besides adding elegance and beauty to a home, properly cared for hardwood floors have been known to resist the microscopic allergens that carpet can trap, including pet dander, pollen, mites and mold.

If you have to have carpeting, Clements recommends Interface FLOR modular carpet tiles. It’s made in America, is low-VOC, doesn’t require a pad, and has a low profile, meaning it doesn’t trap lots of dust and allergens. Plus, since it’s modular flooring, it’s perfect for the DIYer. ■



In the ‘Hood

Getting along with your neighbors

By Amanda N. Wegner for Capital Newspapers

Walking into his back yard in April, Jeffrey Erickson had quite the surprise: Their new neighbor was cutting down a tree ... on the Ericksons' property!

"An argument ensued," says Erickson. "Something tells me this will brew into a problem that will last indefinitely."

While the Ericksons' new neighbor started off his relationship with the family on the wrong foot, it's best to forge a friendly relationship or, at very least, find some common ground (beside your property line) with your neighbors, as you'll probably be living next to them for the long term.

1. Start easy: Introduce yourself. Strike up a brief conversation. Learn basic information about your neighbor, and look for common interests.

2. Help out: Not only are you building a relationship by offering a helping hand, it increases the chances they'll help you out when you need it.

3. Offer support: If a neighbor becomes ill, has just had a baby, lost a loved one or is generally having a hard time, offer support. Take over a hot meal, mow their lawn or do something similar.

4. Respect boundaries: Most homeowners are protective of their

investments, so letting your dog go to their bathroom in your neighbor's lawn every day or planting on their side of the property line isn't going to win their respect.

5. Create community: Have a block party or organize a neighborhood garage sale. Shared events help get people acquainted with one another and builds camaraderie as they work together to pull off the event.

6. Talk it through: If you do have an issue with your neighbor, talk to them about it. Be non-confrontational and state why their action or behavior is bothersome. Having a mature conversation about an issue will serve you better than attacking them.

However, some people are naturally bullish, possessive, difficult or just plain hard to get along with. If their actions are illegal or their behavior is harassing, you have the right to call authorities. If your neighbor is just difficult to get along with despite your best attempts, keep your distance and do not let them know they are getting under your skin. Just like childhood bullies, difficult neighbors will get tired of their game if they never win.■

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Ballweg. The natural light provided by a solar tube or skylight offsets how often you need to flip on a light switch, reducing your home's electricity use. That translates into savings to your pocketbook and environmental benefits as well.

Setting up your sun

Solar tubes are surpassing skylights in terms of popularity for several reasons, but "each has their place," says Ballweg.

Skylights are best installed during new construction or a remodel because of the carpentry and drywall work required. Sun tunnels, says Richardson, are actually easier to install on existing homes.

"With a Solatube, you don't have to cut rafters or do drywall work. We cut ceiling

holes and install a flashing on the roof under the shingles; you don't even need extra shingles. Plus, a single solar tube can be installed in two hours, year-round," says Richardson.

Solar tubes are also maintenance-free; skylights, because they're essentially a window, do need some cleaning and maintenance now and then.

Solar lighting products have been plagued by a false stereotype through the years: Leakage. But both Richardson and Ballweg say that with improved technology and proper installation, these products do not leak.

"From what I've seen," says Ballweg, who sells, installs and services skylights and sun tunnels, "95 percent of leaks are related to installation and not necessarily the product itself. One that is properly installed shouldn't leak."

In fact, particularly with skylights in bathrooms and kitchens, "condensation is misinterpreted as a leak. In these high-humidity areas, on a cold winter's day, condensation will form and drip. This isn't leaking."

"You have to try really hard to get one of these to leak," adds Ballweg. ■



Skylights are best installed during a new home's construction. And if it's properly installed, it won't leak.