

Supplements

- > [Boomer and Beyond](#)
- > [Green Living at Home](#)
- > [Home Improvement](#)
- > [Back to College](#)
- > [Pets](#)
- > [Kids and Family Living](#)

Sections

- > [Automotive](#)
- > [Bridal](#)
- > [Business](#)
- > [Community Cares](#)
- > [Education/Careers](#)
- > [Español](#)
- > [Family Living](#)
- > [Fashion/Beauty/Fitness](#)
- > [Food/Recipes/Entertaining](#)
- > [Gift Ideas](#)
- > [Green Living](#)
- > [Health Information](#)
- > [Health/Wellness](#)
- > [Home Decorating](#)
- > [Home Improvement](#)
- > [Hot Topics](#)
- > [How-To](#)
- > [Kitchen/Bed/Bath](#)
- > [Lawn/Garden](#)
- > [Money/Finance](#)
- > [News Release](#)
- > [Pets](#)
- > [Real Estate](#)
- > [Seasonal](#)
- > [Senior Living](#)
- > [Tech Talk/Innovation](#)
- > [Travel](#)

Quick Reads

- > [View Quick Reads](#)

Green ways to make summer sun work for you

(BPT) - When summer sun has you slathering on sunscreen and retreating indoors to air-conditioned rooms, it's easy to forget the winter doldrums that made you eagerly anticipate sunshine and warm temperatures. Winter snow and dreary days seem far away, and you find yourself craving a respite from too much sun.

But all that summer sun can work in your favor. From powering your hot water heater or fresh air skylight to saving money by running your clothes dryer less, here are a few ways you can put the sun to work for you this summer.

Solar water heating

Replacing an old water heater proactively is a good idea for a number of reasons. First, if it's older, it's probably not as energy efficient as newer models. And, when hot water heaters die, they can do so spectacularly, flooding the room where they're housed and leaving your family without the water they need to shower off summer sweat and keep clothes and dishes clean.

Consider replacing your current water heater with a solar water heating system. While such systems may cost more to purchase and install than a conventional one, various federal and state tax credits and other green product incentives mitigate those costs. Plus, solar hot water systems reduce energy costs in the long run.

"The cost of a solar water heating system will vary depending on the size of the home and the volume of water you need to heat," says Ross Vandermark of Velux America, marketers of solar-powered fresh air skylights and solar water heating systems. "On average, however, they can cut your water heating bills by 50 to 80 percent, which is pretty impressive when you consider that the U.S. Department of Energy says water heating can account for up to 25 percent of a home's energy consumption."

Solar-powered fresh air skylight

You can also save money and improve your indoor air quality by opting for a solar-powered fresh air skylight. Energy efficient solar powered skylights and accessories like solar powered skylight blinds, which can increase energy efficiency by another 45 percent, are eligible for a 30 percent federal tax credit, as is the installation cost. Velux offers a tax calculator on its website to help you estimate your savings with the tax credit.

Energy Star-qualified, no leak solar-powered fresh-air skylights, like those made by Velux America, improve indoor air quality by allowing excess moisture and unhealthy air to escape your home. They also passively vent hot air that rises to your ceiling in summer, reducing the load on your mechanical cooling systems while reducing your power bill. In rooms where a fresh air skylight isn't an option, tubular skylights like Sun Tunnel products allow light inside, reducing the need for artificial light and brightening areas like hallways, closets, and other interior spaces both large and small.

Clothes drying

Humans have been using solar power to dry clothes for about as long as we've been wearing fabric. Hanging clothes to dry in the sun allows you to trim your electric or gas use (depending on how you power your clothes dryer) as much as \$85 a year, plus it reduces the wear clothes experience tumbling in a dryer, the website The Daily Green points out.

The California Energy Commission says on average, it costs 30 to 40 cents per load to dry clothes in an electric machine, and 15 to 20 cents if your dryer runs on gas. By comparison, line drying requires an initial outlay to cover the cost of the line device, and then the sunshine and fresh air are free.

Cooking

Sure you love cooking outdoors, but when summer really heats up no one wants to slave over a hot grill. Why not use the sun's power to cook food without the need to hover over and watch it? Solar cookers are the answer.

One popular type, box cookers can accommodate multiple dishes at once and are used in countries around the world where the sun is the most reliable source of energy. They cook at moderate to high temperatures and require less supervision than your gas grill. You can buy one online or build your own - a great family project that can help teach kids about solar power and greener living.

Finally, if you're not ready to learn a whole new way of cooking, why not simply borrow a page from great-grandma's recipe book and use sunlight to brew tea? Just place a few bags of your favorite tea in a glass jar with water (make sure to keep the tags and strings hanging over the rim of the jar), cap the jar and place it in the sun until the tea steeps to your desire flavor level.

ARTICLE IMAGE(S)



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