

OVERVIEW

In Colorado the sun shines 300 days a year! Solar power is an efficient, economical and sustainable way to heat your home and provide hot water. Approximately 1.5 million homes and more than 250,000 commercial and industrial buildings in the United States use solar thermal technology to provide consistent, reliable hot water.

A solar thermal system is an up-front investment in 30 years of clean, reliable, fossil free power. Because its fuel – the sun – is free, a solar thermal system will provide hot water or heat long after it has paid for itself in monthly energy savings. Even as energy prices rise, the cost to heat water or your home will never increase over the life of the system. When properly maintained, a solar thermal system can last 30 years or more.

HOW DOES SOLAR THERMAL WORK?

On a sunny winter day the air inside a parked car will heat up despite the temperature outside. Solar thermal collectors or “panels” work the same way. Collectors are mounted on a south-facing roof or on the ground. Sealed tubes containing a heat transfer fluid pass through the solar collectors to absorb and trap the sun’s heat. The heated fluid then passes through a heat exchanger in a well-insulated water storage tank where it heats water for domestic use.

Solar thermal usually supplements rather than replaces existing hot water heaters, so the solar storage tank is connected to a conventional water heater or boiler to provide additional backup heat, as needed, on cloudy days or when large amounts of domestic hot water are in demand. A very large solar storage tank can be used without backup heater, but this approach is more expensive and can be less reliable if there are several consecutive cloudy days and heavy hot water demand.

There are two types of solar thermal systems most commonly installed in Colorado, both referred to as “flat-panel” collectors. One is a “closed loop” system using antifreeze and water as the heat transfer fluid. The other uses distilled water as the heat transfer fluid and a “drainback” storage tank and pump system to prevent the water from freezing on very cold days. Each of these has slightly different cost structures and maintenance requirements because of the different equipment involved.

Another type of solar thermal system uses evacuated tube collectors. A relatively new technology, these collectors perform better than flat plate collectors in cloudier or colder climates and can achieve higher water temperatures. Evacuated tube systems have higher up-front costs, but considering performance, the installed cost is close to that of flat-plate collectors.

DOMESTIC HOT WATER

Solar thermal can be used to heat domestic hot water (DHW) for bathing, dishwashing, clothes-washing, cleaning or any other domestic need. In Colorado, Solar thermal systems for DHW generally replace natural gas or propane water heaters. Hot water heating is one of the biggest energy uses in the home, so using sunlight to heat water can cut utility bills substantially. A well-sited 2 panel system (about 64 ft² of surface area) with an 80-120 gallon storage tank can provide about 70-80% of average DHW needs for a family of four – about 100 gallons per day.

DOMESTIC SPACE HEATING

Solar thermal systems can provide heat as well as DHW, but this requires more panels and a larger storage tank. System size for both heating and DHW depends on factors such as home size, indoor temperature settings, plumbing requirements, and the amount of heat you want solar to provide. Solar heating requires additional plumbing equipment and labor costs and may not be cost effective unless the home has a summer-season use for heat, such as a pool. Most systems used for heating and DHW are sized to meet between 65-75% of the homes heating demand and 80% of DHW.

Most solar heating systems use plumbing in the floor (“radiant” heating) or baseboards (“hydronic” heating) to circulate hot water. Radiant and hydronic heating systems are quieter than typical forced air heating systems (no noisy furnace cycling); they heat the home more evenly with humidified air providing greater comfort and reduce airborne dust, drafts and indoor air movement. Because they are designed to meet only a portion of the heating demand, solar heating systems must interface with another heating system, such as an existing forced air or hydronic baseboard system, which can be sized smaller to accommodate the reduced demands put on them.

COSTS AND OTHER DETAILS

Whether you’re installing a solar system for just hot water or for heat and hot water, it is important to first make your home as efficient as possible. Utilizing water-efficient appliances, low-flow showerheads and faucets, and lowering the hot water temperature set point will substantially reduce your hot water demand. Similarly, if you are considering a solar system for heat, sealing your home’s shell and making certain it is adequately insulated will reduce space heating demands. Implementing these efficiency measures first will allow for a smaller solar system to meet your needs.

A good time to consider installing a solar thermal system is if you are:

- ☼ Building a new home or remodeling. Over a 20 year mortgage loan, monthly energy savings could be greater than the added payment to cover the cost of your solar system.
- ☼ Replacing a furnace or hot water heater.
- ☼ Heating a pool or spa.
- ☼ Using propane or electricity to heat water.
- ☼ Installing hydronic heating.
- ☼ Homeowners that install solar thermal systems before **December 31, 2008** can receive a Federal tax credit of 30% of the system cost to a maximum of \$2000.

More information on rebates:

http://www.dsireusa.org/library/includes/incentive2.cfm?Incentive_Code=C006F&state=CO&CurrentPageID=1

LEARN MORE

Skinny on “Air Sealing”, “Ducts”, “Insulation”

<http://www.conservationcenter.org>

U.S. Department of Energy-Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy

http://www1.eere.energy.gov/solar/sh_basics_water.html

Basics on solar heating.