



# Home & garden

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# Home, sweet low energy home

*Couple aims for comfort and is rewarded with lower bills*

BY DOLORES FOX CIARDELLI

When Anne and David Stark landscaped their front yard in Pleasanton three years ago, their goal was for it to be low maintenance and water efficient as well as attractive and enjoyable.

They hired Livermore landscaper Susan Ballinger to design a replacement for the lawn, which needed watering twice a day in the summer.

"And the rest of the year it didn't look that good," David said.

Ballinger chose a generous number of drought tolerant plants placed around a floor of flagstones with *Dymondia* growing in between.

"A big truck pulled up and started disgorging all these plants," recalled David with a laugh.

Ballinger placed each plant in its appropriate spot and the Starks — veteran do-it-yourselfers — went to work.

"We planted them all," Anne said, remembering both the hard work and the satisfaction.

The front yard is anchored by a slightly mounded central garden with a basalt column bubbling fountain, which is run by solar energy from a panel on the sunny side of the house. Raised flagstones provide seating around the perimeter, a perfect place for the Starks to enjoy the blooms and the soothing sounds of running water.

"It created this whole new big space," David said.

A drip irrigation system with more than 200 emitters supplies the scant water the plants need.

But the Stark's biggest move toward energy efficiency has come with improvements inside their home, which is in Amador Estates, built in 1965-66. Stark is public affairs director of the Bay East Association of Realtors, and when he was approached by a regional energy efficiency group, he offered up his own home as a site to train energy auditors.

"They were welcome to use our house but I said I want to sit in on the training," he recalled.

A half dozen contractors came to the training and were led through the procedure — looking for drafts, checking the insulation, water heater, heating and air conditioner units, lights, windows and doors.

"They had a field day with our furnace. It was the original furnace from 1965," Stark said. "It gave me pause — they spent a lot of time testing for combustive gases."

The Starks bought the home 12 years ago, moving from a condominium mainly because they needed a garage to store and do maintenance on the vintage motorcycles

they both race. They knew the older home needed upgrades but wanted to do them in a cost-effective manner.

"We definitely live within our means," David said, explaining that they keep the thermostat low. "We wear hoodies — and snuggle up."

At the end of the energy inspection, the auditors had a long list of deficiencies.

"The bottom line? The house was bad news," David said. "At the culmination we realized this really was a 'leaky' house."

The Starks looked into solar energy and were told their home had the ideal roof, facing south and with no shade. But their energy bill was already so low that the investment was not worth it.

They said the real reason for their energy conservation improvements was to have a more comfortable home, which they share with their two cats, Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo.

"It's nice to save energy but that was not the real reason we did it," David said.

"And we didn't do the project to make the home more valuable," he emphasized. "We're not expecting any kind of return on investment — aside from a more comfortable home."

As with the yard, they were hands-on with the house's energy upgrades.

"We removed the insulation in the attic ourselves," Anne said. "It was a really awful job."

Donned in face masks and goggles, they removed 30 full-sized garbage bags of the old disintegrated insulation.

"At one point we looked at each other cross the attic and said, 'At least we're together,'" David recalled.

Then the professionals blew 14 inches of new insulation into the attic. They also installed new ducts, sealed the old attic entrance and cut a new access in the hallway, and relocated the heater to the attic. This freed up the small hallway closet, which was converted for storage.

"They also suggested a vapor barrier under the floors — insulation under the floor from the crawl space," Anne said.

Now the hardwood floors are no long cold to the touch.

The Starks rave about the new heater, which is both efficient and quiet.

"For years we said we have to get a new heater," Anne said. "We were sick of it being cold. The older heater would kick on every 30 minutes. Now we set it at 65 degrees and it kicks on once."

"Sealing up the house also made a huge difference in the noise," David said, explaining that they no longer hear the rush hour



COURTESY STARKS

Anne and David Stark hired a landscaper to design a low-maintenance, drought tolerant front yard for their home in Amador Estates. Also shown on cover.

traffic on nearby Santa Rita Road.

"We're saving \$30 a month on our energy bill," Anne noted.

This would not be much for some households but the economical Starks are saving between 20% and 25% on their PG&E bills from the same time last year.

"The home is warmer, costs less and is more comfortable," David added.

They researched online to find rebates through Energy Upgrade California as well as Alameda County and the city of Pleasanton.

"We did a test when they came in and a test at the end to get our money back," David

said. "The contractor handled all the paperwork."

Their rebates added up to \$4,000 for a job that totalled approximately \$20,000.

"The largest cost was the furnace/air conditioner," David said. "The actual construction was two weeks, 10 days."

Their next project will be the back yard, which was paved over by former owners.

"We've heard it was gorgeous — they did a lot with potted plants," David said. "But we like the concept of water permeable

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The Starks' attic space now contains the new heating unit, ducts and insulation, all upgrades to correct leakage and inefficiencies found in an energy audit of their home.



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# Expanding outdoor living space adds value to your home

Even during a challenging economy, the outdoor living trend remains popular as homeowners seek to add lasting value and functional living space under the sky and stars. Whether it's a do-it-yourself patio or a professionally installed outdoor kitchen, the beauty, usefulness, value and ease of maintenance in outdoor living space is limitless.

Extending living space outdoors is as old as time itself.

"Creating an outdoor room is a natural extension of your indoor living space," says landscape architect John Johnson. "By creating a space in the open air and adding elements like fireplaces, pergolas, water features and greenery, you get a very different feel. People want and need that connection to the outdoors."

## Adding value

Without erecting the traditional four walls and roof, outdoor living space can be easily added to large, small, twin or town homes. Enhancing an outdoor space with hardscapes adds value and can be adapted for multiple uses.

"Homeowners continue to embrace the trend of maximizing outdoor living space, whether it's an outdoor kitchen or patio living room with a fire pit," says Lonny Sekeres, a landscape designer. "Real estate experts say that for every dollar you invest in landscaping projects, you could see up to a \$2 return when you sell your home."

Do-it-yourselfers will find easy-to-install, maintenance-free pavers and segmental retaining wall systems are budget-friendly for patios, walkways, courtyards, raised gardens, fire features and wall projects. New construction should include plans for exterior

hardscapes, and remodels can benefit from the advice of design-build professionals or experts from a landscape supplies retailer, says Sekeres.

"There are so many solutions to fit any budget and need," says Sekeres. "Products like permeable pavers allow rainwater drainage if needed, and retaining walls come in colors that complement any environment."

## Al fresco living

As a natural extension of the home's ground floor, a patio expands a family's living and entertaining space significantly. It provides a perfect gathering spot for guests and family who will be drawn from indoor dining areas to this enticing space.

A popular trend is to expand kitchen space with outdoor grilling areas, stone fireplaces for cooking wood-fired pizza, or stone counters around a grill for food preparation.

"Because the kitchen is typically the customary gathering place in the home, it's a natural extension for family and entertaining guests," Sekeres says.

## Warming accents

A fire feature such as a fireplace, pit, table, pot or ring creates an inviting outdoor focal point as well as a functional spot for entertaining, says Sekeres. A half-circle seat wall or outdoor furniture around a fire pit or table creates a cozy nook, and adding a grill, pub set, chaise or settee can transform a patio into a lounge for gatherings well into the evening and late in the season.

A newer trend is the green or living wall, says Sekeres, and now there are products that let do-it-yourselfers and professional installers alike easily add drama and beauty



BRANDPOINT

A stepped landing conveniently leads guests from kitchen to outdoor dining, creating the perfect outdoor space to eat and drink, entertain family and friends, or gather round a fire ring to share stories and create memories.

to retaining walls.

"A living wall planted with herbs near an outdoor grill or a landscaped wall of flowers is an eye-catching, eco-friendly and unique use of retaining walls," says Sekeres.

## Adding ambiance

Pathways created with pavers, stepping stones and permeable pavers can join both back and front outdoor living spaces.

"New homes and older homes make good use of the longstanding porch design," says Sekeres. "It's easy to create a paver walkway linking the front and back or an outdoor kitchen to a lounge area."

Lighting installed within steps and along

paths can also add a unified ambiance to a home's hardscape. Adding decor such as pergolas, trellises and arbors covered with natural materials like bamboo or fiber screens is a great solution for privacy, shade or continuity of design.

"There's no limit to the hundreds of ideas to enhance your yard," says Sekeres. "Many products are easy for the do-it-yourselfer with manufacturer instructions, seminars and other resources. Talk to a landscape professional, visit a home and garden show and landscape supply stores, or search the Internet for inspiration. Take advantage of the outside to easily expand your living space."

—Brandpoint

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# Front door says more than 'enter here'

Nothing says "Welcome" like a freshly painted front door.

Depending on the sun exposure, a door may need repainting or replacing sooner rather than later. If you can see light around it from the inside, if it is hard to close or lock, or if the door itself is warped, it's time to consider a new door.

Even if you can't see light, air may be moving through gaps in the weather stripping. On a very cold or hot day, hold the back of your hand an inch or so away from the bottom and perimeter of your door. If you can feel air moving or a significant cold spot, that's a signal your existing door could benefit from better sealing. High-performance fiberglass doors available now can have four times more insulation than wood doors.

Once a new door is installed, or if an old door is still functional but looking weary, it's time to consider what color to paint it. Remember that your front door is where you leave the world behind and enter your personal retreat, so color is a big part of the experience. Pick something that contrasts with the rest of the house enough to draw the eye but still works with the surrounding colors.

Here is what traditions — and color psychologists — have to say about front door colors:

- Red. By painting the front door red, the owner is saying the home is full of life, energy and excitement. In Feng Shui, a red front door means "welcome," and in early American tradition, it meant the same thing — if a home had a red front door, tired folks



THINKSTOCK IMAGES

Color psychologists say a red front door indicates the home is full of life, energy and excitement. In Feng Shui, a red front door means "welcome."

traveling by horse and buggy would know they were welcome to stop and rest.

- Brown. An earthy tone is friendly, beckons you in and helps you feel grounded but while

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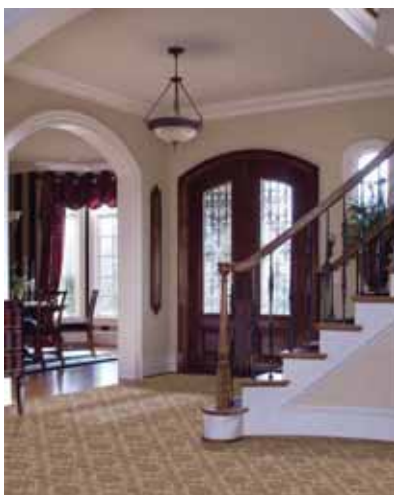
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## DOOR

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a brown front door looks natural and organic, it can send mixed messages in terms of color psychology. Some darker shades of brown signal a desire for privacy, even isolation.

■ Blue. A blue front door signals that the owner views the home as a place of refuge — calm, serene and relaxing, the perfect retreat from a demanding world. Blue also denotes loyalty, so anyone who paints their front door blue indicates a sense of loyalty and wealth.

■ Dark blue doors are believed to create calm and peace for your home, plus are thought to bring positive energy. Like a uniform or a great business suit, navy blue commands respect.

■ Green. Green brings to mind health, harmony and the outdoors, all good attributes for a home environment. Psychologically speaking, green connotes health, safety, tranquility and harmony, also good for the home environment.

■ Black. A black front door projects strength, sophistication, power and authority, indicating to all who enter or even passersby that the home is a serious place inhabited by a person of substance.

■ White. White is the classic front door color. White throughout history represents virtue, purity and simplicity.

■ Yellow is a color that evokes mental clarity, perception, understanding, wisdom, confidence, curiosity, humor and merriment.

■ Purple. In some cultures, a purple door signifies royalty and wealth, but not necessarily monetary wealth. In Feng Shui it is connected with psychic activities such as meditation. In the West, clairvoyants and religious clergy use purple to show their connection to the spiritual side. Because it is an unusual color for a front door, painting your front door purple can show the world that you are open-minded and willing to think outside the box.

■ Dark gray. Harmony resides here. Not too warm, not too cold, a gray in perfect balance.

Drive around your neighborhood and look at other doors to see what works and what doesn't. Try photographing the front of your house, making a larger print, then holding paint chips over the front door to try out various colors.

Once painted, your front door will extend a friendly greeting to visitors, but more importantly it will welcome you. ■

## ENERGY

Continued from Page 3

surfaces.”

The first step was to hire Ballinger to again design a low-maintenance, drought tolerant, beautiful yard.

“We've found out we can have all those things and an effective space for entertaining,

which is also cheap to operate,” David said.

“We've spent the last few weeks dismantling the patio cover,” he added. “We removed all of the nails, and we were able to set aside the recycled redwood to sell to someone.”

From top to bottom, front to back, the Stark home is energy efficient, up to date and easy to maintain. But most of all, it's comfortable. ■



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