

# Sunshine Power for the Sunshine State

Solar power comes into its own as builders and owners begin to harness the power of one of Florida's "charms"

by Janina Birtolo

**W**hen *Times of the Islands* made its home on Sanibel 10 years ago, we were drawn—like most visitors and residents—by the island's charms. At the top of the charm list were Sanibel's sun and warmth, characteristics that admittedly tend to demand air-conditioning during the summer months. But the abundant sun and warmth here also beg the question: Couldn't they be used to generate power to keep us cool when it gets too hot or when storms knock out the electricity?

The answer is yes—sort of. Solar power has been surprisingly slow in coming to the Sunshine State, primarily because of high costs, few incentives, and the availability of relatively inexpensive electricity. Yet, the past decade has brought a significant up-turn in interest in solar energy and the first encouraging steps toward using the sun to supplement power for homes, especially in Southwest Florida—and especially with recently skyrocketing fuel prices.

"When we had the energy crunch the last time, in the 1980s, the government gave a lot of money to look into solar power," recalls Roy Bonnell, executive director of the Florida Green Building Coalition (FGBC). "Unfortunately, that attracted a lot of charlatans and price gouging, and then the government pulled



**Solar panels on residential roofs are becoming a common sight throughout Florida and other places where sunshine is plentiful.**

the rug out on the funding. It has been a recovery period ever since. But lately a couple of things have changed."

One of the most important of those changes was an energy law signed by President George Bush in 2005, allowing a tax credit of 30 percent (up to \$2,000) for solar systems installed between January 1, 2006, and December 31, 2007. Last May, the Florida legislature

passed similar incentives at the state level.

"Previously, there weren't any incentives," Bonnell explains. "In fact, there was a disincentive because a lot of developments here restricted solar panels on home roofs. It's against the law to do that."

Bonnell has followed the development of solar power in Southwest Florida closely. A former recycling education

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coordinator for The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, he was a founding member and served as project manager for Florida Gulf Coast University's Green Building Project from 1999 to 2002. This \$1-million project will construct a green building learning center on the FGCU campus, in partnership with WCI Communities.

Bonnell's current organization, FGBC, was the next logical step—a statewide organization to determine and promote standards for exactly what qualifies as green building. "In 2001, we came out with a green standard for homes," Bonnell says. "We followed that with green development standards for city and county governments, then brought out a commercial building standard. Now we are partnering for an affordable housing standard with the Florida Home Builders Association."

The most cost effective solar application in Southwest Florida, Bonnell says, is the use of solar panels to make hot water and/or heat swimming pools. Such

systems have become increasingly popular in the past decade. But photo-voltaics (in which PV cells collect light and convert it to electricity) are also starting to catch on. In May, Jon Butts became the first Tampa Electric customer to connect his home's PV system into the utility's system—a move that will save an estimated 40 percent on his electric bill and earn him credit from the company for fuel it doesn't have to burn. Similar reward programs are offered by Florida Power & Light.

The FGBC Web site ([www.FloridaGreenBuilding.org](http://www.FloridaGreenBuilding.org)) offers information on solar power for homes, along with a checklist of other energy saving efforts homeowners can make easily. In-depth solar information can be found at [www.flaseref.org](http://www.flaseref.org), the Web site of the Florida Solar Energy Research & Education Foundation.

"Promoting solar energy is an education process," Bonnell says. "And in the past, there have not been incentives. These latest energy bills promote

both. Neither is perfect, but they're better than what we've had. Southwest Florida now is actually the hot bed of green building in the state." 🌿

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**HABITATS**  
**Crashing the Gates of Convention**  
*Security and style come together as works of art.*  
 Fern blends with function in the gate to Norman and Carol Jackson's house. The unpainted aluminum gate was designed to reflect Southwest Florida with details of plants and wildlife.  
 Since it was installed two years ago, the gate has attracted a lot of attention from passersby. "It's like a huge piece of jewelry," Perry says. "It's gotten to be a landmark on that street."  
 While there is a far more elaborate than most residential gates in Southwest Florida, the Jacksons are among a growing number of residents who are boosting the demand not just for gates, but for gates that ensure security with the style and grace befitting the home they are protecting.  
 "A gate gives people a sense of boundary and security," says Naples-based landscape architect W. Christian Bink, but it also enhances the architecture of a house and the statement the homeowner wants to make. "Everybody has personality in their residence."  
 When Perry was working on the Jackson gate, "we tried to think about where we were and what we were doing," she says. "The landscape inside was to use only beach grasses and succulents, not grapes, coconut palms—very specific beach plantings. We wanted to carry that theme out. Nothing that wouldn't relate to the house." She came up with a design that features native birds and foliage, and the fabricator at Florida Aluminum and Steel Fabricators Inc. added a few more details.  
 "The Jacksons are so pleased with the effect that they are planning a similar gate for their Ohio house. Their gate stands out in a region where even conventional entrance gates still are  
 Jill Tyrer  
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## All About Habitats

**T**imes of the Islands has encouraged creativity and distinctiveness in home design and construction by showcasing unique homes and local housing trends throughout the years. Here are a few of the articles that exhibit interesting Florida homes:

"Tim Macko's Grand Illusions," by Libby Boren McMillan. Summer 1997

"At Home Behind the Mangroves," by Lynne Hendricks. Winter 1997-98

"A Tropical Cottage," by Libby Boren McMillan. Spring 1998

"A House of Art and Humor," by Libby Boren McMillan. May/June 1998

"Katie Gardenia's Magical World," by Libby Boren McMillan. July/August 1998

"Seeking Sanctuary," by Susan Holly. July/August 1999

"Crashing the Gates of Convention," by Jill Tyrer. July/August 2000

"A Couple's Dream House Comes True," by Gwenda Hiatt-Clements. January/February 2001

"The Taste of Italy," by Barbara Linstrom-Arnold. March/April 2002

"The House That James Built," by Jill Tyrer. July/August 2003

"Great Game Rooms," by J.G. Samuels. March/April 2004

"Small Space, Big Reward," by Beth Luberecki. November/December 2005

"Casa de Sueños," by Suzanne Tissier LaBounty. July/August 2006