



Tips for Hiring a Solar Contractor

- **Hire a licensed contractor.** Call the Contractors State License Board at 800-321-2752 or visit cslb.ca.gov.
- **Check for insurance.** Always insist upon a certificate of insurance for general liability.
- **Verify workers' compensation insurance.** California requires this for any employer with one or more employees. If a contractor is exempt from the requirement, any workers on the job must belong to another subcontractor who is insured.
- **Get references and multiple bids**—in writing.
- **Get a thorough written contract before work begins.** Any work valued at more than \$500 requires a contract. Specify start and completion dates, and insist on a progressive payment schedule spelled out in dollars and cents. If you're spending thousands, consider investing hundreds for an attorney to review the contract.
- **Never sign a contract under pressure.**
- **Pay as you go.** Never pay more than 10 percent down or \$1,000—whichever is less. Hold back 10 percent for the final payment after the job is complete. Never pay for work before it is done.
- **Always pay by check or credit card.**
- **Keep a file**—for receipts, permits, plans and anything else pertaining to the job.

Sources: California Contractors State Licensing Board and the San Diego Regional Energy Office.

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Taking the Solar Plunge

April. Unless you're a surfer, the ocean's too cold, and so is the pool. But it's one of the best months, contractors say, to put in a heated pool or add a solar-collector system to one already in the backyard.

Pool expert Bryan Selby, of Advanced Solar Technologies, says heating pools with solar power has never been a hard sell here. "Because of our sunny climate" he says, "about 60 percent of San Diego homes with pools use solar energy to heat their water." With the right amount of sunshine, solar systems heat a pool eight to 10 months of the year to a comfortable 80 to 85 degrees.

Your yard won't be crawling with guys for weeks to put in a system, either, he says. "Generally a solar-collector system can be up and running in one or two days," says Selby.

A.J. Wilson of Like New Pool Services, a past director of the San Diego chapter of the Association of Pool and Spa Professionals, says a system for an average-size pool (15 feet by 30 feet, or 16,000 gallons) costs about \$3,500.

"My customers are very wary of how high energy costs for natural gas and electricity will be in future," Wilson says. "That uncertainty is driving them to install solar systems."

And if that's not enough to float your boat, consider: Selby says the system can pay for itself—via lower utility bills—in as little as a year. ❖