

GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

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Not Just for the Rich, Fancy People

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I used to think that using solar energy to power your home was kind of an unrealistic pipe dream, like living on Mars or driverless cars that don't crash. But now I see solar panels on tons of roofs all over the Chicago suburbs.

In my mind, putting solar panels on your roof was a rich-fancy-person thing, like for the people who live in Barrington or Burr Ridge. Now, I see them in Carol Stream and West Chicago. I actually even know some "regular" people who've had them installed, and they're very happy to tell you all about the payoff and how much they're saving on their electric bill.

And that's the thing—it's no longer a rich-fancy-person thing. There are plenty of companies out there that manufacture and supply solar panels, so you can shop around. And there's even a federal tax credit where you can earn up to 30% of your total system cost. The ones I know that have the system said that the savings on their utility bill is notable. Plus, it's sustainable.

We're also starting to notice more greenhouse growers taking advantage of solar (or photovoltaics, if you want to be fancy), as well. Last month in the May issue, we featured a two-page photo of a solar panel array we saw while visiting Four Star Greenhouse in early April. Dan Foster, Four Star's Senior Manager of Growing Operations, said they estimate about 30% of their general energy usage will come directly from the solar panels and that they should pay off within three years. And the whole array should last 30 to 35 years.

All of that certainly seems worth it, but there's still some research that needs to be done on how photovoltaics affect greenhouse production, depending on geographical location.

A trio of researchers delve into the world of possibilities with using photovoltaics (PV) in the greenhouse in a two-part series that starts this month as our cover story. Read about the different types of PV technology and how they can be incorporated into your greenhouse.

To continue with this month's theme of greenhouse equipment, we re-visit your safety checklist to help manage risks in the greenhouse and how to save money by speeding up your watering. We also have a preview of the tours you can take advantage of if you attend the Plug & Cutting Conference being held in Orlando this September.

And, as in every June, we showcase our three finalists for the *GrowerTalks*/Ball Horticultural Company Young Grower Award by featuring their essays on a specific topic, this time about how they balance their work and personal lives in order to avoid burnout. (Some of us could take their advice ...)

There's so much new technology that we're constantly introduced to sometimes it's hard to keep up. And not all of it has proven to be worthwhile or is only attainable for the rich, fancy people. But market demands often advance innovation so that we regular people can also take advantage of those technologies. Who knows? One day those self-driving cars may be safe enough to drive us to our Mars space flight. **GT**