

DILEMMA

Is this a good time to opt for solar energy?

The panels are cheaper than ever and you can sell your surplus energy... The future's bright for solar power, says **Lucy Siegle**



Real, gutsy solar power is as rare as hen's teeth in this country. By the real deal I mean photovoltaic (PV) systems that convert sunlight into electricity as opposed to rather prosaic solar thermal systems

that heat water. Last year just 6MW of solar PV was installed in this country. Compare and contrast the situation in Germany, where more than 1,500MW was installed last year and one in 10 buildings has a solar power system.

This is ludicrous because solar PV could provide 30-40% of the UK's total electricity needs by 2050, reducing CO₂ emissions by 15% a year. An average domestic system (a fairly modest 1.8kWp PV system) can provide at least 25% of a household's energy. The sticking point has been the expense.

Luckily there are sunnier days ahead. We've been waiting years for a Feed-in Tariff scheme (rebranded as the Clean Energy Cash Back Scheme), and now it is expected to arrive in April 2010. This will guarantee domestic PV installations 36.5 pence per kw hour of electricity they feed back into the grid, probably for around 25 years.

However campaign groups, notably We Support Solar (www.wesupportsolar.net), say that this is too miserly given that 36.5p represents just a 4% return on income for most domestic installations. They believe 8% would be nearer the mark. Still, even 4% is preferable to a poke in the eye, which is what's being offered to those brave pioneers who became adopters

of solar PV from 2002. If plans go through, they'll get just 9p for their surplus output. You would, however, be able to enjoy the more generous tariff and possibly a grant (£10m is available until April via the Low Carbon Buildings Programme in the form of £2,500 per household – go to www.lowcarbonbuildings.org.uk).

And you'll be able to take advantage of the fact that solar panels have come down in price. According to Sharp, a UK-based solar-module manufacturer, units

are 30% cheaper than a year ago. You can get different types to stick on or integrate into your roof, not just the traditional crystalline cells using reject silicon from the electronics industry. The new wave is full of efficient, sleek models. Some look uncannily like normal roof tiles. Thanks to a recession in Spain (a voracious PV consumer) there are lots around. Visit the rooftop garden at Solar Century (www.solarcentury.co.uk) in London to see them up close.

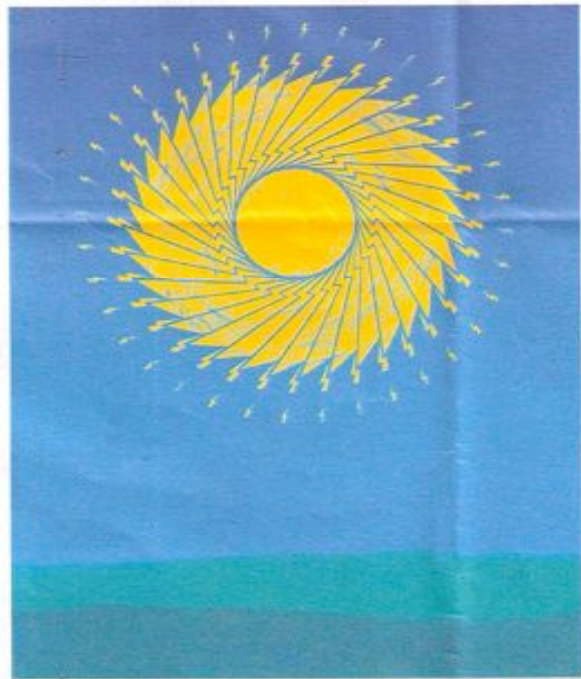
But in the solar rush, remember to purchase responsibly. PV cells are far from ecologically innocuous, as they contain a concoction of toxic conductors. They

should be manufactured in a closed-loop system to high environmental standards (www.sharp.co.uk).

They also remain the only renewable really attuned to normal life. You can add them on to a house without incurring the wrath of planning departments or undertaking huge civil engineering projects.

Solar PV systems are good house guests, and the clouds are definitely clearing.★

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▲ RAISING THE ROOF

A newly designated 2,000m² Local Nature Reserve has an extra feature. It's on the roof of Sharrow primary school in Sheffield

▲ TELL 'EM ABOUT THE HONEY

Liam Gallagher has found a new gig, supporting the plight of the honey bee. "We've got to save them before they all buzz off," he warns

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GOING UP

GREEN GAUGE

GOING DOWN

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▼ BACK IN THE DOCK

Total's appeal trial over the 1999 oil disaster in which Erika an oil tanker broke in two – leaking out 270,000 tonnes of oil – has reopened in Paris

▼ KINGS OF THE JUNGLE

"Meso predators" such as baboons are taking over from "apex predators" such as lions due to a decrease in numbers. It's leading to an imbalance, warn scientists



DO THE RIGHT THING We each use 150 litres of water a day, at least a third of which runs down the plug in the shower. Invest in an aerated head to introduce air to the flow and use 50% less water