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## Home, green home

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### **A growing number of Melburnians are plucking the idea of sustainable living from the too-hard basket, writes Dan Rule.**

Rushing past the rambling native shrubs and climbing the few crooked steps to the front veranda, there's little that differentiates Stuart McQuire and Wendy Orams' home from any other in their quiet, hillside street. A late-1920s Californian bungalow perched on an elevated block, the house is typical of its West Brunswick surrounds.

A red-brick facade adjoins rows of gently fading weatherboards; a thin concrete driveway runs beside the western wall; a slightly wonky, homemade water feature — bordered by sections of old fence palings — sits proudly in the middle of the yard.

And all seems normal enough inside as well. They have a large television, an air-conditioner and a typical collection of household electrical appliances. But while conventional at first glance, McQuire and Orams' unrenovated home is one of the best-performing environmentally sustainable houses in the country. And the results speak for themselves. Indeed, despite living a normal lifestyle with their two daughters, the couple doesn't pay electricity bills — rather receives credit notices.

"We haven't payed for electricity in over 10 years," the 46-year-old McQuire announces proudly. "We generate more than we use, and we've done so for the 10 years we've had solar panels. In fact, we've only used three-quarters of what the solar has produced on average.

We still get charged a supply charge, but the surplus we create in summer completely offsets the supply charge."

In 1996, their home became just the second in Australia — the first in Victoria — to have grid-connected solar electricity.

But that's only the beginning.

Since first buying the house in 1990, the couple has gradually transformed it, incorporating the grid-connected solar electricity, solar hot water, four rainwater tanks, a water recycling system, composting, chooks and a permaculture garden — which boasts more than 20 fruit and nut trees — without making any major renovations.

"It's always been primarily our family home," says McQuire as we do the tour. "So all these things had to be integrated into how we wanted to live.

"But the results have been that we use virtually no mains water — most of it's either rainwater or recycled water — and in terms of greenhouse emissions, we've cut them by over 90 per cent since 1994. In 1994, our water consumption wasn't just on the average, but often above the average for a typical Melbourne home — as we've got a fairly big garden — but we've dropped that so we're using about 97 per cent less than the average now, and the garden still looks good and we still use water in the house."

McQuire and Orams, who have backgrounds in environmental science, say they make few compromises to live the way they do. While being connected to the electricity grid means they can use as many appliances as they want, rain-water showers and water recycling means they can use water liberally.

"Because we've got our own water supply and it's powered by solar and it gets recycled, I don't feel like I need to take short showers," McQuire says with a laugh. "Sure, it's about maybe changing some habits and doing things less wastefully and more efficiently, but I don't feel like we're making sacrifices or missing out on anything."

"It's the opposite of a sacrifice," says Orams. "Like, with the garden, instead of just looking nice, it's providing some food. And it's not like we're not shopping at the supermarket, too," he adds. "It's not like we're Amish, using the horse and cart."

And they're not alone. A growing number of Melburnians are either making their existing homes more sustainable, or building environmentally friendly homes from scratch. Indeed, as part of Sustainable House Day, which runs nationwide next weekend, there will be 12 sustainable houses — including McQuire and Orams' property — open for tours in the Melbourne area alone.

Paula Gibson-Roy, who, with her sister-in-law, owns and operates a business specialising in environmentally sustainable building projects, is the designer-builder for one such house in Coburg: a 1920s weatherboard renovation that utilises passive solar design, heavy insulation, solar water heating, grey water, re-glazing and all recycled building materials. She, too, believes that people can live sustainably with little sacrifice.

"You can design a sustainable home for the same price as a regular house, if you're just looking at getting the basics right," she offers matter-of-factly.

"There are really basic things that people can do that don't affect the way they live in their house. Just getting the orientation right and window placement and using a bit of double-glazing don't affect the way you live at all. So people can make some very minor changes that will make a huge difference to energy and water consumption. Obviously, it's when you start adding solar and grey-water systems that you start looking at a bit more money."

Jeremy Spencer and his wife's house in Altona Meadows, which features a north-facing orientation, solar hydronic heating, central clerestory windows and renewable and recycled timbers, will also be on display as part of Sustainable House Day. Spencer and his wife quit their jobs five years ago to return to train to be builders, and have since built three new environmental houses. For them, the notion of sustainable housing being accessible is perhaps the most important factor in convincing people to affect change.

"The technology is there so apart from, I guess, lack of motivation there's nothing to actually stop us from going down that path," says Spencer. "People are thinking about it more, and just logically they have to. With rising petrol prices, people are, for one, starting to think more about their energy sources, but, secondly, how they've been living on this planet."

McQuire, who recently started a service called Green Makeover, in which he advises households about sustainable living options, puts it in more simple terms. "Even the more expensive technology, like solar electricity and recycled water, is affordable to most people, but they're

putting it through what I call the 'pay-back filter'," he says. "When they're thinking about buying the rainwater tank or the solar water heater or whatever, they'll ask, 'How long will it take to pay for itself?'"

It is a relevant question, though. Converting a family home such as McQuire's does require a certain amount of capital. The equivalent costs of installing a similar solar electricity unit to McQuire's today would be about \$15,000 (\$5800 for smaller units), while solar hot water (approximately \$3000 after government rebate), water recycling (approximately \$3500) and rainwater tanks (between \$700 and \$1100 per tank) each raise initial expenses substantially.

But McQuire believes — especially in the context of no longer having to pay for electricity, and paying an absolute minimum for water — that it's more an issue of mindset than exact finances.

"The problem is that people aren't putting things like the plasma TV or the second family car through that same pay-back filter. Obviously you need to feel good about the decision.

But if you do get a solar power station on your roof or get rainwater tanks in your garden, then every time it's sunny or it's raining, you'll feel good about that decision. So you'll feel good pretty often," he says with a laugh.

With all his cherished sustainable technology, McQuire is willing to admit that his focus has strayed when it comes to other jobs around the house. "I used to be a house painter, and I'm still trying to finish painting this place," he says with a smile. A house like this used to take me about three or four weeks, but ours seems to be taking me about 10 years." But it's all for the love. "I'm an enthusiast, obviously . . ." He pauses, letting out a nervous laugh. "But I hope I'm not a fanatic."

Sustainable House Day runs over this weekend.

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