

Green and growing: EarthCraft House program flourishes in Virginia

by Daisy Massey and K.C. McGurren

Going green is popping up in every aspect of our society, from an emphasis on organic produce and energy-efficient appliances to alternative fuels and hybrid vehicles. But going green in construction is the most readily accessible means of reducing our energy consumption because, according to the Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration, buildings use 48 percent of our national energy and consume 76 percent of the electricity produced in the United States.

Numerous green building programs exist, but careful consideration of standards, testing and sampling procedures should be evaluated.

The EarthCraft House program was started in 1999 by Southface Energy Institute, the Southeast's most-recognized green building organization. By working with builders in partnership with the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association, the EarthCraft House program was created to raise the bar in residential home construction.

Houses in the program must satisfy stringent criteria for energy performance and conservation measures, as well as achieve resource-efficient design. Every single home is commissioned, field-verified and pressure-tested to certify it as an EarthCraft House, recognizing a 15 percent minimum energy savings over a code-built home. Beyond being energy efficient, these homes have cleaner air, consume less water and are more environmentally friendly than their standard counterpart.

In 2005, in cooperation with the Blue Ridge Home Builders Association in Charlottesville, a pilot project of 12 EarthCraft Houses were constructed and certified. In 2006, with the help of the Virginia Community Development Corp., in partnership with the Home Builders Association of Virginia, the EarthCraft House program was officially launched in Virginia to further establish the brand as the premiere green building program of the Southeast.

Virginia's EarthCraft team has trained more than 1,000 builders, architects and construction professionals at regularly offered



Now a recognized standard for high-performance green building, EarthCraft House is the only green building program to receive NAHB's Green Building Program of the Year award twice, in 2004 and again in 2007.

educational sessions. Certifying more than 90 homes and more than 500 multifamily housing units, with 250 single-family homes and more than 1,000 multifamily units scheduled to certify in 2008, EarthCraft Virginia continues to grow and educate statewide.

Chuck Miller of Miller Custom Homes, who built his first EarthCraft house for the 2007 Homearama hosted by Tidewater Builders Association, has nothing but praise for the program. "The people involved in EarthCraft — from the technical support to the administrative staff — are great to work with and are always willing to help. They're just a phone call away if you have any questions you need answered."

Miller adds that out of the last five houses he's built, five have been EarthCraft-certified. "If it wasn't a good program, I wouldn't keep doing it," he says. "There are other programs out there but I'm sticking with this one. It's simple, easy to implement and it just makes sense to be a part of it."

Many others across the state agree. Some prominent projects that also propose 100 percent-certified EarthCraft homes include the Charlottesville community of

Belvedere by Hauser Homes and Church Hill Homes, the Blacksburg neighborhoods of Mount Tabor Meadows (48 lots) by Green Valley Builders and Echols Village II by SAS Builders, Benchmark Builders' The Preserve at Two Ford (29 lots) and Madison Field by ICON Development in Roanoke, Walnut Creek (37 lots) by J&D Builders in Christiansburg, and several communities by HHHunt in Williamsburg and Hampton Roads.

The success of the program is due to the high quality and standards that EarthCraft requires on all of its projects. Each building goes through a series of site verification and diagnostic pressure tests by a third-party EarthCraft technical adviser. These advisers provide field support to builders and ensure quality trade work to advance builders to green building standards.

Final diagnostic testing of every home must meet the required air exchange of the building and duct leakage standards. Homeowners have begun to recognize these branded homes as more sustainable — homes that are a cut above the norm with assured comfort, lower utility bills and cleaner indoor air.

The program provides education, flexibility and quality assurance to the builder for a fraction of the cost of other green building programs. As consumers become more knowledgeable about green building, builders are finding it necessary to distinguish themselves from their competitors by integrating green building approaches and techniques into their projects and business models. **VAB**

EarthCraft Virginia, in association with HBAV, enables its builder members to have access to educational trainings, unbiased advice and field assistance. For more information about EarthCraft and its training sessions, visit www.earthcraftvirginia.org or call (804) 225-9843.