

Consumer's Guide To Sunrooms



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What is a Sunroom?

A sunroom is a glass and screen outdoor living room installed on a wood or concrete foundation. It is also referred to as a patio room, solarium, patio enclosure or Florida room. Walls of glass bring in sunlight, and protect you from wind, bugs, rain, and chill. Composed primarily of single or double pane glass, sunrooms should be designed to fit the style and look of your home.

Sunroom additions are a popular means of home improvement. They are an affordable way of adding space to your home. Sunrooms let you enjoy the outdoors in comfort. Depending on the style you choose, your sunroom can be a 3-season or year round room, increasing the enjoyment and resale value of your home.

The Evolution and History of Sunrooms

Think of a sunroom as a modern-day front porch! Farmhouses and urban row homes featured a covered porch as a place to sit and relax at the end of the day. With the suburbanization of America, families moved to their back patios for their rest and relaxation. But rain made patios un-usable, and bothersome bugs sent people running for cover. This motivated many families to cover and screen in their patio.

As the window industry evolved, it became possible to purchase storm windows and attach them together under a roof to enclose a patio, getting even more use from the outdoor space. In response to homeowners' desire for a better looking, more functional outdoor room, the patio room industry was born.

During the 1960's, professional re-modeling companies developed affordable systems to enclose a patio or deck, offering design, installation, and full service warranties. Patio rooms featured lightweight, engineered roof panels, single pane glass, and aluminum construction. These cost effective and versatile patio rooms extended the outdoor season, provided protection from rain and bugs, and gave homeowners extra space.

As consumers became more energy conscious and building technology advanced, patio and sunrooms became available with insulated glass, vinyl framework, and more elaborate designs. Many American companies also began to offer greenhouses and conservatories, which were popular in Europe.

How Do I Choose a Sunroom

When choosing a patio or sunroom you want to consider the best choice to meet your needs. How you plan to use the room should determine your choice of materials

and size. Choose a sunroom style that is versatile and matches the architecture of your home.

If you want to add a ceiling fan, be sure you build sufficient height into the plans. It may be necessary to add a dormer to the roof to get the height you want. Ask the company in advance. If you want to shingle the roof of the sunroom to match your house, alert the contractor to make sure the roof system specified will support the added weight.

Quality is a critical aspect to consider when choosing a sunroom. Seek a contractor who can demonstrate that they will use quality materials to construct your project. After all, a sunroom is an extension of your biggest investment - your home! Be sure it will provide many years of trouble free use.

Common Uses for a Sunroom

Sunrooms are the perfect way to use your deck without interference from the weather.

- Add extra space to your home
- Bring the outdoors inside
- Keep bugs out
- A place to relax; enjoy the garden
- Dining area
- Breakfast Room
- TV / Music Room
- Family Room
- Game/Spa room
- Place for pets or plants
- Playroom for children, grandchildren
- Hobby, Crafting or Exercise Room
- Place to read, relax, retreat and nap
- Place to work
- Entertainment area for special occasions, birthday parties or holidays

Size and Location of a Sunroom

First think about how you expect you will use your new sunroom. Then, choose the best location. Finally, decide on a size that will best fit your needs. A small sunroom is ideal for morning coffee and relaxing, but if you entertain often, you may want more square footage.

Most homeowners install their sunrooms at the back of the house, because their deck or patio is located there. But deciding the optimum design and location for your sunroom may depend on other factors. Think about how sunlight exposure varies throughout the day. Southern and western exposures bring in more sunlight and heat than northern exposures.

Consider the traffic flow of your home when deciding where to position the doors to and from the sunroom. Many sunrooms are built off the kitchen or family room, because these are the most often used rooms inside the house.

Vinyl or Aluminum

Understanding the materials that go into a sunroom can help you select the product that is right for you. While aluminum patio and sunrooms have been on the market for decades, vinyl sunrooms have been introduced more recently and tend to cost more. The color choices may vary, as well. Neither requires painting, and both materials are virtually maintenance free.

Think about how your family will use the room, and the climate in which you live. If you plan to heat or cool your sunroom during extreme temperatures, vinyl may be the better choice. **Vinyl** is strong, durable and thermally efficient offering double pane glass for the best insulation for year-round use. Vinyl may be the better choice. Vinyl extrusions require aluminum inserts to provide strength and rigidity in the posts and beams.

Aluminum provides structural support, is cost-efficient, strong, and light-weight. Aluminum patio rooms utilize single or double pane glass and are commonly used as 3-season rooms. Aluminum is a strong material and can stand on its own.

Choosing a Sunroom Company

Selecting the Right Dealer

One of the best ways to find a reputable company is to seek referrals from people who recently had sunrooms installed. Interview and meet with the recommended contractors to discuss your plans and ideas. Ask them for references and see the work they have done. Check their references but realize that contractors usually provide a list of their most satisfied customers.

Focus on quality and trust when you meet with a contractor instead of budget and timeline. It is important to trust the contractor who will be working on your home - your largest investment. Be cautious of lowball bids. When considering quality, "you get what you pay for" applies here.

Make sure that the contractor is licensed and insured with a reputable firm. Ask if they are a member of local or national homebuilder's and remodeling associations. Ask how long a company has been in business. Choose an established company who will be around to provide you with assistance should a future problem arise.

Make sure the company answers all of your questions to give you enough information to make an educated buying decision. Check with your local Better Business Bureau to see if there are any complaints on file – and whether those complaints were resolved.

If the contractor has a showroom, check out their workmanship and the quality of their materials. The company should provide you with accurate to-the-penny pricing, without any hidden costs. Be careful about estimates or bids – they are often unreliable and you may find yourself paying more for the project than you were led to believe.

The company should use their own crews to install the room. The contractor/foreman should supervise the project with regular on site visits. The company should have a process to immediately notify you of changes or delays in the schedule. The company should take care of obtaining the building permit and arrange for the final inspection. Make sure that the company does in fact pull a permit; this is their responsibility. Without a valid permit and certificate of occupancy, you might not be able to sell your home with the sunroom in place.

The company should provide you with a complete and thorough walk through inspection of the finished product. Make sure the company or contractor warrants their materials for several years and wants you to be totally satisfied with your sunroom.

How to make Sunrooms Affordable

Your sunroom should be custom-built for your home. Choose a company who can manufacture a variety of styles and any size sunroom to complement your home and suit your needs. Look for a dealer who can provide you with financing options to work within your budget.

Sunrooms can increase the resale value of your home. Homeowners who sell their homes say their sunroom helped their home sell quickly.

Avoiding Installation and Service Nightmares

A good sunroom company will educate you about the process they will follow in building your sunroom. This begins with a careful measure and site inspection by the company's technical staff, to check for concerns that might have an impact on the installation.

Your sunroom company should prepare the engineering documents and permit applications and submit them to the local building department, and arrange for the necessary inspections during the installation process.

The installation crew should be well mannered, hardworking, and considerate of your home and property. A lead installer or foreman should visit the job site every day.

Manufacturer and Service Warranties

Make sure the sunroom dealer offers a Manufacturer's Warranty and a Service Warranty. A warranty should cover the parts used in the installation for several years. Labor guarantees should cover at least the first year. A manufacturer's warranty may be separate from the dealer's service warranty.

Look for a company who stands behind their products and installations. Choose a dealer who uses their own crews of factory trained employees and not subcontractors. Be sure there is a parts warranty that is backed by a reputable manufacturer.

A Manufacturer's Warranty You Can Count On

A warranty is only as good as the company who stands behind it. You need to be able to count on the manufacturer to be in business if you ever need warranty service on your sunroom. Visit the manufacturer's website to find out how long they have been in business, and whether they have a long-term, exclusive agreement with the dealer in your area. A good strong relationship between the manufacturer and the company who installs your sunroom usually means better service and installation.

Frequently Asked Questions about Sunrooms

Why do homeowners invest in a sunroom?

Many reasons: sunrooms expand your living space and increase the value of your home. They bring the outdoors inside and offer an area for relaxation and enjoyment.

How do people use their sunrooms?

People use the extra space the sunrooms provide as a place to retreat and relax. Some people use their sunrooms for: family rooms, dining and entertaining areas, as a playroom for children or grandchildren, workplace area, exercise room, reading room, room to do arts and crafts, a room to gaze out at the stars or simply a room to close your eyes for a few minutes on a Saturday afternoon. The possibilities are endless.

What's better – a sunroom or a conventional room addition?

A sunroom is designed for comfortable outdoor living – it's not "just another room in the house." The expense for a sunroom can be considerably lower than a conventional room addition. Unlike conventional construction, a typical sunroom can be built in as little as a week with little mess or disturbance to your lifestyle. Because a sunroom has the feel of the outdoors, it has a different feel than a typical family room. They lend themselves to casual furnishings such as wicker and rattan, and provide a wonderful environment for plants. Most sunroom owners say it is their favorite room in the house.

Why is a sunroom a good investment?

Homeowners who sell their homes say their sunroom helped their home sell quickly, and they received a more than reasonable return on their sunroom investment. Families who have sunrooms talk about them as a place to relax, de-stress, and get away from it all.

How do I find a reputable sunroom dealer?

- Seek referrals from people who recently had sunrooms installed.
- Research the internet.
- Make sure the company is licensed and their license is current.
- Ask how long the company has been in business. Choose a manufacturer who has a long and stable business history.
- Check the quality of the materials and the workmanship.
- The company should be familiar with financing options.
- Ask what percentage of their business is from referrals by past customers.
- The company should provide you with an accurate cost to the penny - without any hidden charges.
- The company should use their own crews to install the sunroom – not subcontractors.
- The owner or installation foreman should supervise the project with regular on-site visits.
- The company should have a process to notify you immediately of changes or delays in the schedule.

- The company should provide you with a complete and thorough walk-through inspection of the finished product.
- The company should answer all of your questions and provide information for you to make an educated decision.
- The company should take care of obtaining the building permit and arrange for all of the required inspections by your local building department.
- Look for a warranty that is backed by a reputable manufacturer.

What is the best type of glass to use?

Tempered glass is the safest. It breaks into tiny pebble-like pieces, while standard glass breaks in sharp serrated debris. Single pane windows have just one pane of glass. They offer less insulation protection from heat or cold. Double pane (or insulated) glass contains a sealed air pocket between the inner and outer panes to resist the flow of heat. Find out if Low-E glass is available, and whether all of the glass is covered under warranty, and under what conditions. Think about how you plan to use your sunroom, and choose the type of glass that is most appropriate for your needs and budget.

What questions should I ask the Sunroom Dealer?

- Why should I choose a sunroom over a standard room addition?
- What size sunrooms are available?
- How long will it take to build my sunroom?
- Why should I do business with you?
- Why are you the best at what you do?
- Tell me about the company that is going to manufacture the materials for my sunroom.
- How many rooms have your crews built?
- What type of warranty is available?
- Are your installers employees of your company or are they subcontractors?
- Who trains your installation staff?
- What percentage of your overall business is sunrooms?
- What is the process for obtaining a building permit for the sunroom?
- Is there a sunroom that your company has recently built that we could see?

What to Watch for – and Watch Out for When Choosing a Sunroom

See the product... Quality Counts. Not all sunrooms are the same. There are many different products on the market with varying levels of quality. Look for a fully engineered system that is sturdy and well manufactured.

Ask the contractor if they have a showroom where you can see full size models or ask to see their finished work on someone's home. Let the homeowner tell you about their experience working with the company and their employees.

Compare cost and value. After you visit a show room, make sure to ask if they offer a free, no obligation consultation and measure at your home to provide you with an exact cost for your project. Some sunroom contractors offer estimates over the phone. This can hide the true cost of the project. Scheduling an appointment would be the only true way to be sure you can compare the cost and value of each product before selecting a sunroom company.

Ask about insurance. Workers' Compensation insurance is a big expense that many contractors don't want to absorb, so they cut corners by hiring sub-contractors to do the installation work. If an uninsured worker is injured on your property, you could bear the liability.

Check the roller wheels on windows and doors. It's the rollers that keep operation smooth for the long term. Look for window rollers that are the same size and quality as those used on the doors, for effortless operation every time. Steel rollers on stainless steel tracks are the best system for heavy windows and doors. The rollers should be adjustable and covered under the warranty.

Watch out for skimpy frames! Some patio and sunroom doors and windows have roll formed aluminum frames, which are not as strong as extruded frames. Frames should be sturdy to take all of the use given to doors and windows in a sunroom.

Check out the handles. Your sunroom will get lots of use, so the door and window handles should be strong and easy to use. Color matched handles with mortise locks look better – and last longer! Screen handles should be full size and well fastened. Try them out on the demonstration model the design consultant brings to your home, visit the showroom or ask to see a sunroom on a display home in your area.

Look at the screen material. Most screen material is fiberglass or nylon. These materials can stretch which will make a belly in the screen. They also tear easily and can be burned with a cigarette or a spark from the grill. **Aluminum** screens will not stretch or tear, and will not burn. That gives the screen a better look in the frame, and will not need frequent replacement or service. **Screens should be glare free.** Flat

black aluminum screens minimize the obstruction of your outdoor view, and are stronger than fiberglass or nylon screens.

Ask if sub-contractors will be used on the construction. If so, find out how and what part of the work they will do. If sub-contractors are used for specialty work on your installation, be sure they are fully insured and that your sunroom company will stand behind their work.

Be sure you get the right permits and necessary inspections. Identify what permits will be required and how they will be processed. Find out who will schedule the inspections required by your local building department.

Water Control System -*The Floor Channel* is an important part of your water control system. In most sunrooms channels are attached to the deck or foundation. Water can collect in a flat channel. Look for a floor channel that has a slope to the outside of the room. If water gets in, it will go to the front of the room and will not sit in the channel or backup into the room. Floor channels should be sealed to keep water from seeping under the channel so the sunroom stays warm and dry on the inside. The same type of channel should be used under the window main frames to move water away from the room. *Weepholes* are another important part of the water control system. Weepholes are elongated holes that are pre-punched at the factory to prevent clogging and allow water to flow freely. Factory drilled weepholes are better than drainage holes that are drilled on site. Drilling can be controlled at the factory, but not on site. Drilling through aluminum can cause burrs which will trap dirt and clog the holes. Weepholes are located at the lowest point in the floor channel, so water doesn't sit in the channel causing mold or mildew.

Ask what type of house gutters are used. Look for an extruded aluminum gutter that integrates into the finished roof. An extruded gutter is stronger and more durable than a standard house gutter. The gutter should match the sunroom roof in color and design.

Ask what type of warranty is included. How long is the labor guarantee, and what does it include? Ask about Manufacturer's Warranty, and who stands behind it.

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