



Green Tradies

Know a good tradie? It's the age-old enquiry, but the field narrows again if you want to find one that is genuinely 'green'. Natasha Palich gets some tips from the experts.

As anyone who has had some work done on their home would know, getting a good result often depends on getting the right person to do the job. Word of mouth often finds a good contractor and picking a random name out of the local rag often doesn't!

It gets even harder when you are after someone who can provide good advice on the right sustainable solution for your home. How do you find that experienced, knowledgeable contractor who has tried and tested the various products, knows what works and what doesn't and can make effective changes to your home to reduce your environmental impact? I asked four 'green' contractors what it means to be sustainable in their field.



What makes a 'green' plumber?

Green plumbers have a high profile in the building industry and there are an increasing number of plumbers offering green services. Green plumbing for the home covers a wide range of actions, including the installation of basic water-saving products such as taps, shower heads, toilets, washing machines and dishwashers and more specialist water-saving devices such as hot water re-circulating pumps, water re-use technologies such as rainwater collection and re-use, and greywater capture, treatment and re-use. Plumbers are also responsible for the installation of solar hot water systems which reduce household energy use.

A good green plumber will have put themselves through green plumbing training and will have worked with product manufacturers to test what works and doesn't work. They will have a good knowledge of the industry (e.g. what the latest products are, where there are local examples of products installed, what government rebates are available) and will have experience in installing green plumbing systems. Importantly they will care about the environment. Green Plumbing training has been established for a number of years. Originally initiated by the Master Plumbers and Mechanical Services Association of Australia (MPMSAA) in 2000, the green plumbers program has trained thousands of plumbers across Australia. It's readily accessible and a starting point for any green plumbing credentials.

www.greenplumbers.com.au

From a consumer point of view, there are some key questions to ask when you are looking for a green plumber. These might include:

- What type of plumbing do they do? Is it mostly general household plumbing? What percentage of their work is green plumbing? This might give you an idea of the extent of their experience.
- Have they undertaken any green plumbing training?
- What would they recommend in terms of products? What sort of warranties do these products have?
- Understand that the cheapest product isn't necessarily the best - ask the plumber why they suggest one product over another.
- Can they provide references and is it possible to see examples of their work?
- Ask what they have done in their own home...

Before you talk to anyone, do some research first. See what you can find out about what is possible in your home and have some specific questions ready.

What makes a 'green' electrician?

It is likely to be quite difficult to find a credible green electrician. It is important to look for someone who has both the background training and the experience. Green electrician training options include EcoSmart Electricians training by the National Electrical and Communications Association.

www.ecosmartelectricians.com.au

And the Global Green Electricians™ (GGE) accredited training course supported by the Electrical Trades Union of Australia.

www.ggelectricians.com

Both training schemes educate the electrician in areas of energy efficiency and renewable energy installation.

So what skills can you expect a good experienced green electrician to have? The key point of difference will be their ability to identify opportunities within the home or business where the best potential energy savings can be made. They will be able to do an energy audit of your home to determine how much energy is being used and where. They will know the best products to use in each application, and also what new innovations are available. The ability to provide specialist advice on design opportunities before starting is what you should be looking for.

It is important to note that green electricians are not necessarily accredited solar power installers - these require separate streams of accreditation; however, there are an increasing number of electricians who offer both services.

To assist in determining whether the electrician you are talking to has the relevant experience to help you reduce energy use in your home, you might consider asking them the following:

- Have they undertaken accredited training in energy efficiency or renewable energy installation?
- Can they explain to you what an energy efficient light is?
- What do they think is the most energy efficient way of completing the task you want done, e.g. new heating or cooling system / lighting / appliances etc.?
- Do they have references or previous installations of energy efficient work you can visit? →

What makes a 'green' painter?

Sustainable and healthy painting solutions are reasonably well known in the industry as an alternative option for healthy indoor environments but the extent of solutions a green painter can provide is perhaps less well known. Reducing the environmental impact of the painting trade has a number of key features: firstly, a green painter will recycle any waste, and avoid releasing waste water to natural ground and aquatic systems; secondly, they will support and use low-VOC paints (VOCs are volatile organic compounds which react photochemically with sunlight to produce smog, and are also harmful to human health); thirdly, they will be familiar with and experienced in the use of natural paint products – made from renewable or highly abundant resources such as plant oils, clay and lime instead of petrochemicals; and finally, they will encourage the use of heat reflective paints on roofs which can reduce the energy use in the building and reduce the urban heat island effect.

Training is available and although a relatively recent development, the courses cover a range of key skills.

www.greenpainters.com.au/training_courses.htm

That is possibly one of the first questions to ask when looking for a 'green' painter – have they undertaken accredited green painters training?

Other important issues to discuss with the painter might include:

- Do they have experience in using natural paints?
- What low-VOC paint would they recommend using and why? (ask them what they would use in their house)
- Discuss with the painter if you have any key health concerns, such as allergies, that you are trying to address with a healthier paint option.
- Ask what they do on site to minimise the environmental impact of the waste products.



What makes a 'green' joiner?

Green joinery isn't perhaps as well recognised as other trades, but is just as important in terms of creating a healthy environment and reducing resource use. Joiners typically 'fix' indoor furnishings such as kitchens, bathrooms, shelves. The materials used in these products can emit harmful to the body and are more than likely to include materials that are unsustainably sourced. Green joinery will comprise low-emitting (or e-zero) materials and often include renewable materials such as plywood (made from plantation pine).

A good joiner focussing on sustainable solutions will have to address some of the issues inherent in the industry – such as the large number of suppliers, the minimum order of low-VOC materials in quantities far exceeding the amount required for a project. At this stage there doesn't appear to be any specific training for green cabinetry making, which means that on-the-job training and experience is critical. Individual research and investment in sustainable materials will differentiate the dedicated, personally committed to providing sustainable solutions.

Again, it is best to inform yourself as well as you can before talking with the joiners, but here are some example questions to ask when seeking their services:

- What range of materials can they make their joinery from?
- What are these products made from (e.g. if they are using solid wood products, what sort of timber is it and where is it sourced from)?
- Where do these products come from (are they from locally sourced or Australia manufactured under Australian Standards or are they an international product manufactured under different standards/ rigorous requirements)?
- How do they get around the issue of the minimum order of e-zero materials?
- Are the adhesives and finishes they use water-based?
- Can they design more sustainable options into the project (and keep to a budget)?

And thanks...

Many thanks to the following contractors for chatting with me:

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