A little window research goes a long way

Whether constructing a new home or remodeling an older residence, one of the decisions a homeowner ultimately faces involves the selection of windows. There are many styles and manufacturers from which to choose, each offering a variety of construction features. To some extent, personal style and aesthetics will drive the decision. Price and energy efficiency also are considerations. While you may be tempted to defer to the recommendations of your builder or remodeler there are several questions every consumer should ask before making any window buying decision.

A sure sign of a well-constructed, quality unit is the certification label either etched in the glass or printed on the spacers between the lites of glass. Windows can earn one of three designations — C, CB or CBA — depending on how they perform in the tests. The CBA level is the highest rating and means that a window has passed through three levels of simulated weatherization testing without showing signs of condensation or fogging.

A well-constructed, dual pane unit should last a minimum of 10 years. However, many manufacturers offer only a one-year warranty.

If you are considering purchasing a dual pane, sealed window unit, ask your contractor about the manufacturer's warranty that accompanies the window. If the window system fails in five years, causing excessive drafts or allowing condensation to form between the panes, will the manufacturer replace it?

Also, inquire as to whether any of the window components are covered. For instance, Tremco, the manufacturer of the insulating glass edge spacer, Swiggle® Seal, offers window manufacturers a warranty on their product.

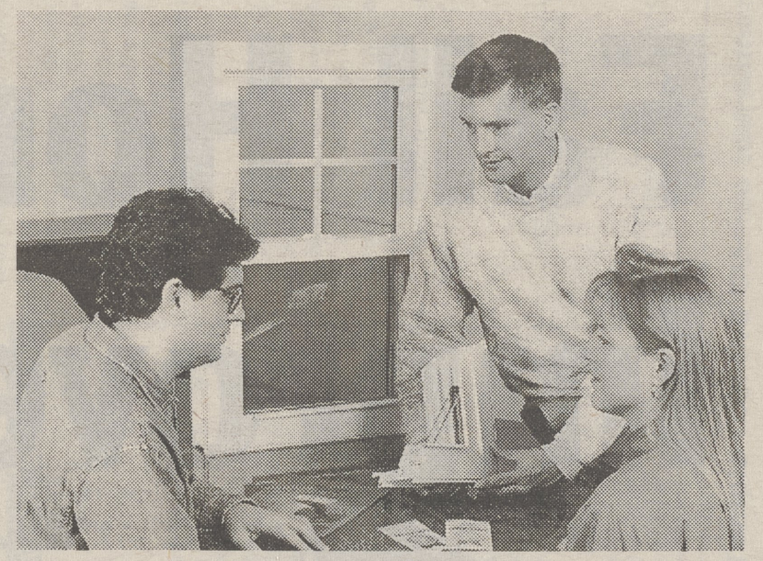
Window manufacturers use U-values to measure thermal performance. U-values measure heat transfer. They describe the overall thermal performance of a window unit, taking into account such aspects of the unit's construction as window type, frame material, glass coatings and spacer materials. When determining a window's energy-efficiency, the lower the U-value, the better. A U-value of .40 is considered excellent; .60 is good; while .80 or higher indicates poor thermal performance.

Dual and triple pane windows are constructed with edge spacers designed to reduce heat loss around the windows' edges. The materials used to construct these edge spacers can mean the difference between a drafty window edge and one that is well insulated against the cold.

Some window manufacturers use conventional, tubular aluminum spacers filled with desiccant, a moisture-absorbing material that aids in preventing condensation from building up between the panes. However, because metal conducts heat, aluminum spacers diminish the insulation value of a window, resulting in a higher U-value.

Other manufacturers have abandoned aluminum spacers in favor of warm-edge spacers. However, not all warm edge seals perform identically. A window constructed with a warm-edge spacer such as Swiggle Seal will be 9 degrees warmer and reduce condensation by up to 80 percent than an identical window constructed with an aluminum spacer.

Regular, uncoated glass allows heat to escape from your home in winter, and in summer, allows heat to flow from the hot outdoors into your air-conditioned rooms. To guard against this phenomenon, some window manufacturers use low emissivity — or low-E — coatings on one pane. Low-E coatings block the long-wave infrared radiation that can account for as much as 60 percent of a window's heat loss. They also protect indoor furnishings from sun damage.



'Window shopping' means learning what features each brand has, then making a smart choice.

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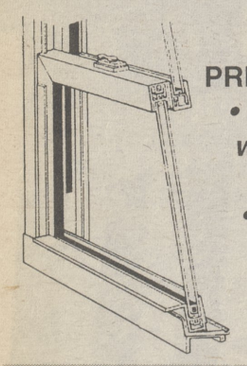

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Fall plants and flowers offer their own colorful celebration

Most people think of spring as the most dramatic celebration of color in the landscape. One by one, so many trees and shrubs wake up with a beautiful display forsythia, crocus, daffodils, weeping cherries, flowering fruit trees, lilacs, azaleas, dogwood, tulips, rhododendrons everyone knows the flowers and the names of these plants. This is the time when the public descends on the garden center to bring their favorite spring flowers into their landscape.

Fall offers a different kind of color the brilliant reds and oranges of a landscape going to sleep for the winter and the fruits and berries of completion and harvest. October highlights the dramatic coloration of foliage trees and shrubs that flourish in the Eastern U.S Their brilliant display of autumnal hues is astounding. Glowing reds, gorgeous scarlets, and butternut yellows create combinations of outstanding beauty. Gardeners are enchanted with the striking appearance plant life can provide at this time of year.

Snipes Farm and Nursery, a Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery Association member, recommends the following plants for exciting fall color. Compact Burning Bush turns a brilliant red and is a favorite for borders and hedges. Because of its extreme hardiness and drought tolerance, you will often see this plant in shopping center parking lots and in other public places.

Virginia Sweetspire is a hardy, native plant for sun or shade. The variety 'Henry's Garnet' turns brilliant scarlet in the fall and has larger, white fragrant blooms in June-July than the species.

Many plants are still flowering...Butterflybush and Glossy Abelia produce blooms well into late fall. The Goddess series of Rose of Sharon with large, single blossoms and the exciting, new "Flower Carpet Roses" will finish flowering with a flourish.

Of course, it is the large shade trees that turn the earth to fire and gold in the fall. The Red Maple (Acer rubrum) was named for its fall color; in spring and summer its leaves are green. Nurseries have been creating varieties with even more brilliant fall color, such as 'October Glory' and 'Red Sunset'.

The Callery Pear is another favorite tree for all seasons, with white flowers in the spring, glossy leaves, nice pyramidal shape, and brilliant red fall color.

Walk through the nursery and see so many other trees with brilliant fall foliage - oaks, dogwoods, Sourwood, Ginkgo, and Stewartia, to mention a few.

Many trees and shrubs produce brilliant fall fruit. Flowering Crabapples, Cotoneaster, Firethorn, and more. Beautyberry is a knockout with its lavender 'pearls'. The most popular plant for Fall and winter berries is the holly. A favorite for holiday decorating, hollies can grow in sun or shade. The winterberry holly drops its leaves in the late fall, showing off large, brilliant berries that are very popular in floral arrangements.

Pick the right pro for the job

When you hire a professional to landscape, you should look for someone who's knowledgeable, experienced and highly competent in a specific field.

One measure of a horticultural professional is his or her achievement of the Pennsylvania Accredited Nurseryman (PAN) status. This status is achieved by completing an extensive examination which tests the essential technical knowledge base of the green goods industry.

PANs have demonstrated their knowledge in plant materials and physiology, maintenance, landscape design, and installation. In addition, a PAN candidate must first attain a level of practical experience or horticulture education before becoming eligible to take the exam.

The objectives of the PAN program are to improve the professional standards of the industry by recognizing individuals who have demonstrated a high level of technical knowledge and to encourage the education and training of industry employees by providing a measurable level of achievement. The PAN program is sponsored by the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association.

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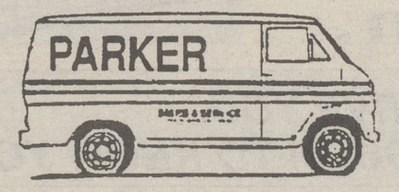

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