

Best residential solar panel

The best solar panels are an excellent investment to power your home sustainably for decades to come. And while energy bills remain sky-high, solar panel prices have dropped significantly over the years, making residential solar power a better buy than ever before.

Buying solar panels isn't like buying other home appliances. Instead of pulling them off the shelf, you usually go through a specialist solar power installation company. However, it's well worth finding out in advance which panels are best for your roof, your needs and your budget. For example, the most efficient models are great for shady spots and limited space, while others are designed to withstand direct sunlight in a heatwave.

To find out more about how to choose the best solar panels for your home and your energy needs, read on for our buying guide, below which you'll find our roundup of mini-reviews. Or, for a quick list of recommendations, see our at-a-glance list.

Most residential solar panel systems in the UK are roof-mounted collections (‘arrays’) of PV (photovoltaic) panels, made using either monocrystalline silicon or the cheaper and less efficient polycrystalline silicon.

There are a few other types of solar panel you can get for domestic energy systems. Thin-film and portable solar panels are less powerful than standard monocrystalline and polycrystalline panels, but are also lighter and more versatile, making them ideal for DIY and off-grid (separate from the mains) uses such as sheds, campervans and houseboats. You can also buy solar thermal systems, which look like a row of tubes and are designed to produce heat from the sun's light.

We don't recommend going the DIY route with a conventional rooftop residential solar PV array. Installing solar panels combines two of the riskiest trades going - roof work and electrics - so DIY installation generally isn't worth the money it saves you. To meet legal requirements and qualify for the Smart Export Guarantee (SEG), which reduces your bills if you produce more electricity than you use, your panels have to be fitted by an MCS-certified installer.

The DIY approach is only recommended for smaller projects such as sheds and campervans. Amazon has portable solar panels for as little as £70 that provide all the renewable energy you need for a camping trip. But for residential PV panels, you'll want to get a quote from an installation company or three.

Even when going through a professional installer, you may still find it useful to check out the per-panel prices and detailed specs of panels that are sold individually online, either by the manufacturer or a third-party seller. For example, the Panasonic HIT N340 - our pick for best solar panel for old roofs - costs £250/panel from Plug-in Solar, where you can get more info and photos.

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You can, but you don't have to. Some big-name energy suppliers supply and install solar PV systems (EDF and E.On, for example), and if you're particularly happy with them as your energy supplier then you may decide to use them for your switch to solar. But it may work out cheaper to have your panels provided and installed by a specialist solar company. All you need to do is let your electricity supplier know that you've had solar panels fitted.

Your best bet is to use the quote-finding tool above, then get three quotes from different providers. Each quote should include specs of the proposed solar PV system, including how much electricity it will produce, and how this compares with your current usage (which you can get from your energy bill).

Before you decide on a quote, the company should send a registered surveyor to carry out detailed checks of your roof in person, and give you a fully itemised list of what you're paying for.

The average solar PV system costs a cool £6,000. So, considering the spend, any company worth its salt should happily take the time to answer your questions, explain your options, help you decide on the best solar panels for your home, and take your own preferences into account.

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