

Solar technology old hat for one local provider

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It's hard to imagine an industry spoken of in more futuristic, 21st century terms than renewable energy.

Indeed, given the enormous leaps - in terms of both efficacy and affordability - made by solar, wind, geothermal, and other green-driven technologies in recent years, such narratives would seem fitting. But ask Jack Haritas, co-owner of the Seabrook-based Atlantic Green Energy, he'll tell you the ideas and concepts are as tried and true - and rooted in old fashioned American ingenuity - as it gets.

A native of Tewkesbury, Mass., Haritas remembers spending quite a bit of time in the garage workshop of his father, who worked as a heating contractor. Too frugal to justify cranking up the heat in the virtually un-insulated workspace, the elder Haritas - along with his apprenticing son - would simply grin and bear hour after chilly hour recalls toiling and tinkering away.

One day, Haritas had an idea: Why not build a makeshift solar furnace, using little more than spare shop parts? An avid reader of Popular Mechanics and Popular Science, the younger Haritas knew enough about the physics of solar technology to pull it off.

"Garages were never well insulated back then, and ours certainly wasn't," recalls Haritas. "We just needed something to help heat the space when the sun was shining - not much more than that."

Using spare duct work and bent metal breaks, it didn't take long for Haritas to come up with an early incarnation of a solar hot air system, today one of the world's fastest-growing green technologies.

"When we finished, we were getting temperatures of 140-degrees at the top when it was sunny out," said Haritas. "That was more than enough to make the workshop much more bearable during the winter."

Haritas would go on to enjoy a three-decade career in the building trades, although his foray into solar technology mostly faded into memory.

Then in 2009, fate - in the form of a massive recession and dried-up construction landscape - intervened. Lacking winter projects for the first time in their respective careers, Haritas and long-time partner George Hurely decided to chart a slightly different - and greener - course.

In early 2009, the two launched Atlantic Green Energy, a catchall alternative energy outlet providing everything from small-scale green retrofitting materials to full Solar (PV) projects and - you guessed it - solar hot air units. Since helping open AGE's doors, Haritas has found himself rediscovering the do-it-yourself curiosity that originally sparked his interest in solar energy.

"I got back into playing around with some smaller solar units right around the time we opened the shop," says Haritas.

"They don't take much more than 12 volts and a 5-watt solar panel to run. In fact, the fan is really the only moving part in the whole system."

"And that," he continues, "is all you really need to circulate warm air through a small space like a garage or workshop."

While AGE is more than capable of hooking customers up with large scale, high investment solar arrays, their sweet spot was - and remains - a line of cost-effective energy saving products not so different in scope from the old makeshift hot air unit Haritas fashioned for his father's garage.

Take the K-Shield reflective radiant barriers, typically installed in a home's attic and capable of reflecting 97% of potentially heat-loss back into the home. Or reflective window insulation shades and blinds, which will save up to 30% on your heating & cooling costs while keeping an excess harmful UV rays from infiltrating your home.

Taken together, these smaller scale green gadgets highlight a unique perspective that Hurley and Haritas have taken as their own: Going Green Gradually.

To be sure, Atlantic Green Energy has prided itself on offering systems and materials squarely at the cutting edge of their newfound industry. But just as impressive is the store's dynamic and diverse educational component, featuring courses and training in Weatherization, Auditing and Solar Installation.

In fact, the store just teamed up with Lakes Region Community College in offering comprehensive weatherization certification.

"That part of what we do is really exciting," explains George Hurley. "Because not only are we offering products that just about anyone can afford, but we're helping train the next generation of solar experts for what lies ahead."

Haritas couldn't agree more:

"It's an exciting time to be in the business, that's for sure."

Just last month, the store joined Green Alliance, a Portsmouth-based organization which helps certify and promoted area sustainability-driven businesses, along with providing discounts to its nearly 3000 consumer members.

Now with three years of intensive solar experience under his belt - and a decades-old passion stoked anew - the future is looking as bright for Haritas and his business as the sun his industry depends on.

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