

Warming up to a solar-heated pool



HOME WORK
**GARY
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Ever since last summer, the most popular pool in the family has been Uncle Leo's.

"Most everyone in my family has a swimming pool," says Leo Pensa of Levittown — known to the children in the family as "Uncle Leo." "But everyone, especially the kids, wants to swim at our house."

The reason: warm water. Just last week, a few days after opening his 16-foot-by-32-foot rectangular pool, the water temperature was nearly 85 degrees, about 10 degrees warmer than the air temperature. "Last summer, I got it up over 90 degrees," Pensa says.

The sky-high price of gas and oil keeps his relatives from turning on their fuel-powered pool heaters. But Leo and Lilly Pensa have no such reservations. They had a solar-heating system installed last summer, and the sun-generated warmth has made the swimming easy.

"If the water was cold, I wouldn't enjoy the pool as much," Lilly Pensa says. "I like it warm, absolutely."

The cost of a solar-heating system for a swimming pool, depending on pool size, can run from \$3,500 to \$5,500, according to Long Island installers. Heaters powered by fossil fuels cost less — between \$3,000 and \$4,000, including installation. But the advantage of a solar system is obvious — the price of installation is a onetime fee; the power of the sun is free. With a fossil-fuel heater, installation is just the beginning — the homeowner has to pay for the fuel. And pay and pay. Over the lifespan of a heater — about five to seven years — the cost of fuel can amount to two or three times that of installation.

"I know people who have gas or oil heaters, and they use it a lot at first," says Les Levy of Bethpage. "Then, they get their bill for fuel, and they don't use it much after that."

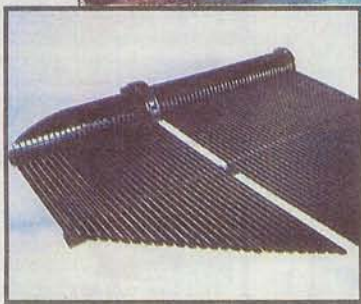
Like Pensa, Levy had his solar heating system installed last summer, when his 20-by-50-foot pool was built. He, too, was floating in warm water earlier this month. "With the water temperature in the mid-80s in May, we can extend the swimming season," he says. "I've always wanted a pool; with the warm water, I can really enjoy it, too."

The systems that heat Pensa's and Levy's pools were



PHOTOS ABOVE AND BELOW BY HOWARD SCHNAPP

A solar system, such as the one above on Leo Pensa's roof in Levittown, heats the pool his kids Nicole and Christopher enjoy. It's regulated by the control panel below. At left is a closeup of a solar panel made by Heliocol.



installed by Sunshine Business Development, a New York City distributor of Heliocol panels. These polypropylene panels are actually individual strands or coils mounted on the roof of the house. Water is pumped from the pool and heated as it circulates through the coils, then returned to the pool. Systems usually include automatic temperature controls that monitor the water temperature in the return line as well as the temperature on the roof.

"These panels are popular because they are lightweight, less than a pound each, and durable," says Nir Eyal of Sunshine Business Development. "The system has a 12-year warranty on parts and labor."

Solar-heating systems for pools are "probably the most popular of solar installations," says Gary Minnick of Go Solar in Riverhead. "We could probably do a hundred swimming pool installations a season, but we do about 25." That's because Minnick has been concentrating on solar-electric systems in recent years, but he says he still hears from satisfied customers who went solar with their pools. As he points out, the benefits are long-lasting — solar systems usually last 12 to 15 years — and the effects are immediate. "Once the system is in," Minnick says, "people are enjoying a heated



pool in a day or so."

Minnick installs panels made by Harter Industries, a New Jersey company that has been making panels for more than 20 years. Like Heliocol, whose panels have been around for about 25 years, the Harter panels are 4 feet wide and come in lengths of 8, 10 and 12 feet.

Usually, the systems are installed on rooftops, but they also can be positioned on the ground or even on fences. Systems are virtually maintenance-free — water drains from the panels when the pump is off — and easy to repair. Should a panel be damaged, it snaps off a hinge and can be quickly replaced.

All of which is good news for people who want to spend more time in warm water — not in hot water. "I knew I wanted a heated pool," Pensa says, "but I also knew that with the cost of gas and oil, a traditional heater was not the way to go."

Solar pool heater sources

For more information on solar-heating systems for swimming pools, visit these sites:

- www.eere.energy.gov/erec/factsheets.html: For a U.S. Department of Energy consumer fact sheet
- www.nspi.org: Web site for the National Spa & Pool Institute
- www.heliocol.com: To learn about Heliocol panels

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