

## DESIGN

# What homebuyers really want: central air, big closets, garages, patios

By DANA DRATCH  
BANKRATE.COM

Homebuyers want the basics. But they also demand the best. Or at least the best their money can buy. The features most in-demand by buyers? According to the National Association of Realtors, the top five are:

- Centralized air conditioning
- Walk-in closet in the master bedroom
- Bedroom on the main floor
- Patio
- Oversized garage

But Realtors caution that the association's 2004 profile of buyers' home-feature preferences study only tells part of the story. Buyers might be seeking common features, but they want high quality. The findings were based on almost 1,500 responses to a six-page questionnaire sent to 25,000 homebuyers who purchased their homes between mid-2003 and mid-2004.

In years past, square footage was the major factor:

"What was in the box was less important than the size of the box," said Ron Phipps, the organization's presidential liaison for housing and diversity, and broker with Phipps Realty in Warwick, R.I.

"The intriguing thing now is that people will focus on quality over quantity, because values have gone up," Phipps said. "They are so much less willing to compromise."

Instead of just a walk-in closet, they look for indications that the seller or builder has put some thought, and money, into the feature. They want an air-conditioning system that's going to cool the house and help them save money. And the patio no longer means a cement slab off the den but instead some actual outdoor living space.

Buyers are also looking behind the walls. Phipps recently had one potential buyer show up for a walk-through with a compass. On the shopping list: a southern exposure. Buyers are also looking for more eco-friendly treatments, more environmentally smart building plans and more efficient use of energy — especially as the price of oil and gas escalate.

"The greening of our consciousness is something that I think you're going to find a lot more conversations about," Phipps said.

Buyers are also looking for homes to fit specific lifestyle needs, like bedrooms on the main floor for aging parents or extra large gathering areas for larger, blended families.

"Life's needs are driving family decisions more than they have for quite some time," Phipps said.

Buyers are also willing to pay more to get what they want. Two-thirds of the people who bought a home last year without a walk-in closet in the master bedroom said they'd be willing to pay extra to get one. (Half admit they'd shell out \$825 or more.) Fifty-four percent of buyers were willing to pay extra to have a patio, too. (And half would pay \$1,075 or more.)

## Favorite rooms

More buyers want a garage than a living room. Seventy-eight percent of home buyers rank a garage as very important, compared to 74 percent for a living room, according to the survey. And a laundry room, say 71 percent, is more critical than a family room, 63 percent.

Remember the days of the formal seldom-used living room and the everyday family room? Over, said Phipps. Instead, families are looking for one large area where they can



SCRIPPS HOWARD PHOTO

A National Association of Realtors survey shows that patios are among the most requested features of homebuyers.

congregate, live and entertain. But what is hanging in there is the idea of a formal dining room for those festive, special occasions.

"Holidays matter," Phipps said. "And I think that's likely to continue."

Buyers also want multiple bathrooms, according to the survey. Nearly three-quarters want two or more. And the figure jumps to 80 percent for repeat buyers.

Kitchens and bathrooms can still sell a house.

Buyers are looking for a little luxury and features and treatments that are the highest quality the price range will permit.

Investing in stainless-steel kitchen appliances, fine wood cabinets and marble or similar quality counters "would be money well-spent," said Charles McMillan, board member with the National Association of Realtors and director of realty relations for Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. "These are the types of amenities expected to be found in homes that command the additional dollars."

In bathrooms, hot items include high-quality fixtures and good tile. Also popular: pedestal sinks and free-standing (think claw-foot) tubs, he said. "The separate tub and shower has been a kind of standard for some time."

## The lifestyle equation

The survey also shows that buyers' tastes aren't uniform. Such factors as the buyer's age, whether it's a first-home purchase and even the region of the country alter the shopping list. And buyers who are scouting new houses set different priorities than those looking at existing homes.

Buyers age 44 and less tend to want homes in the suburbs or in subdivisions, along with access to schools, parks and playgrounds. Older buyers are more likely to want a home that is one story, less than 10 years old, and have a flat lot and lawn sprinkler system. They care more about proximity

to a golf course and less about the distance to parks or schools.

First-time buyers are less likely to place a lot of value on some of the "extras," like walk-in closets in the master bedroom, separate showers in the master bath, lawn sprinklers, granite counters or oversized garages. They are also less likely to include a single-story home or bedroom, on the main floor, on their list of "must haves."

But more repeat buyers want a shower that's separate from the tub, an oversized garage and lawn sprinklers. They are less likely to value a finished basement, proximity to schools or access to public transportation.

A bedroom on the main floor is important; 81 percent of buyers 65 and older ranked it as "very important."

The age of the house also makes a difference. New homes make up 29 percent of last year's sales, according to estimates from the NAR. Those buyers place a higher importance on features like high ceilings, cable or satellite readiness, oversized garages and security systems.

Location can influence choices, too. In the South, nearly 90 percent of home buyers want central air conditioning. In the Northeast, only 37 percent rank it as a very important feature. Similarly, urban buyers want floors, finished basements and access to public transportation. Suburban buyers tend to prefer sprinkler systems, eat-in kitchens and homes less than 10 years old.

## Bigger and better

It's not your imagination. Homes are getting bigger:

According to the Realtors survey, half the houses sold last year were bigger than 1,727 square feet and more than one-third were larger than 2,000. Nearly 10 percent topped 3,000 square feet.

Houses get bigger with successive purchases, too, the study found. For first-time buyers, the median size was 1,451 square feet, while it was 1,920 square feet for repeat buyers.

If you were to average the square footage of all the homes sold last year, the typical house would be between 2,300 and 2,400 square feet, estimates Paul C. Bishop, manager of real estate research for NAR.

So what's the average buyer paying? That depends on how you define "average." The median price indicated in the survey was \$212,000 — meaning half the homes sold for more than \$212,000 and half for less. But if you average the cost of the homes sold, the "average" price would be about \$260,000, Bishop said. Many realtors feel that a few bigger homes on the high end skew the average, so the group prefers to use the halfway marker or "median price."

In the third quarter of 2005 the national median price has climbed to \$216,000, according to the association's most recent figures.

But one of the biggest changes Realtors are seeing is in the buyers themselves, Bishop said. Buyers are doing their homework before they start to shop.

"They are continuing to make greater use of the Internet in their home search," he said. "They are gathering information about property for sale and doing legwork in advance of working with a Realtor."

## REMODELING

# Composite decking: Invest in lower maintenance and more outdoor enjoyment

By NIKKI KEEVER

BUILDERS ASSOCIATION OF GREATER INDIANAPOLIS

As lumber becomes more scarce and expensive, building decks with composite decking materials will become more and more common.

The materials are referred to as composites because they are often made of a variety of materials: some synthetic and some natural. Their appeal lies in the fact that maintenance is greatly reduced, if not entirely eliminated. So if you are one of the legions of people who can't stand the annual maintenance required on your wood deck, composite decks are a real treat. And their use extends beyond decking boards. Many companies offer complimentary railing systems made of the same composite lumber materials, so your entire deck looks unified.

If you think the trend toward these newer materials is fleeting, think again. Pressure treated lumber still dominates the deck materials market at 80 percent, but that represents a decline from 84 percent in 2000. Since 2000, sales of synthetic decking materials have doubled (198 percent) and the sales trends are expected to continue at about 23 percent annually until at least 2010.

The two main factors that consumers have to deal with when deciding to make the leap to these new composite lumber materials is the cost factor and the appearance of the different products available. The cost of composite lumber or decking materials is anywhere from 2 to 5 times that of pressure treated lumber. The main reason composite lumber is doing so well is that annual maintenance is reduced or eliminated, an important consideration.

The second reason is the look of the materials is really getting good.

"Composite decking offers many advantages to treated wood

## Pros and cons of synthetic decking materials

### Pros

- It won't warp or split or crack
- Maintenance is reduced to sweeping and spraying
- It is easily worked with standard tools
- Every piece is quality controlled so less waste during the building phase
- Colors can be matched to your home and won't fade like a wood deck
- Some include recycled materials, so they are more environmentally friendly

### Cons

- It's 2-5 times more expensive than pressure treated lumber
- It's much heavier than wood
- Some of it can't span as far as wood, so it requires smaller joist spacing
- Special fasteners are usually required
- Extreme temperatures can increase flexibility of some composite material

and is becoming more available through independent decking contractors as well as the big box stores," said Charles Barnaby, account executive with Culpepper Wood Preservers, sellers of Fiberon Deck Materials.

So, is a composite deck right for you?

To help you out, the Builders Association of Greater Indianapolis started a review because there are more than 55 manufacturers in the United States and Canada. The selection is broad in both the actual composites used and the finished appearance. Here is a review down into the two categories of materials available, polyethylene-based and polypropylene-based.

## Polyethylene-based composite decking

Polyethylene decking composites make up the largest share of the composite decks market. They comprise wood or wood fiber blends with plastic. This results in a plastic lumber material that is slightly softer, so it may not span quite as far but is easy to work with and can have textured finishes applied to it. They are the most wood-like of the synthetic materials.

ChoiceDeck: Made from 100 percent recycled material and

oak fibers, the environmentally conscious consumer will be happy. Available in 5 different colors. Comes in 5/4-inch thicknesses and is around \$1.75 per foot.

Trex: Their composite material is made from recycled hardwood sawdust and polyethylene plastic and has a wood grain texture for a nice look and feel. It's made from 97 percent recycled material and has a 25-year transferrable warranty. We haven't found any other company that offers this long a transferrable warranty but the cost is slightly higher at \$2-\$3 per foot.

Fiberon Composite Decking: A high density product made from recycled good such as virgin plastics and coke bottles, not recycled shopping bags. Unlike any other, sizes available are 12-, 16-, 20- and 24-foot lengths. Water absorption is .5 percent, an industry leader, as well as 2,180 pounds of hardness. Fiberon offers a 15-year warranty.

## Polypropylene-based composite decking

CorrectDeck: This product is made of polypropylene and 60 percent reclaimed hardwood fiber. It also has a UV-inhibited pigment to protect the color. It makes a very rigid composite lumber decking material.

CrossTimber: Made of oak and polypropylene. Comes in five colors. Brushed, embossed or smooth finishes are available, also. They offer a 25-year limited warranty.

There are a lot to choose from in the world of composite decks and lumbers. Ultimately your choice will depend upon your budget. If you plan to live in your home for at least 10 years, you will get your money back out of your deck. If you are on a tight budget or don't plan to be in your home for more than two or three years, the upfront expense of composite decking materials won't pay off. But the real dividends of the new composite decks and materials comes from how nice they look and their zero maintenance. It's a powerful draw.

## MOVING

# Combining two homes into one household: help for blended families

By ERIN K WITT

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When two families merge, duplicates come with the package. But while two plasma TVs and two computers can be nice perks, two homes are a different story.

New blended families often are faced with a tough decision: Do they sell one of their homes and move into another? Or, is it better to start fresh and sell both properties?

Dave Goff, a Realtor with F.C. Tucker Co., said that financial considerations are usually a major factor in a family's decision-making. But the number of children and their sexes and ages are critically important, too.

"Often, families will decide to sell one home and live in the other. This can work if the home is large enough to accommodate the blended family and if the partner moving into the existing home has no issues with it having been the home of the prior spouse," he said.

"Many times, a total redecorating of the home can change it sufficiently so it no longer feels like the prior couple's home."

Another idea, Goff said, is to sell both homes and buy a new home. This allows the couple to live in "their" home instead of "his" or "her" home.

"It often makes children more comfortable, as they are entering the new home on an equal status," Goff said.

Anne Elsbury, a Realtor with Century 21 Realty Group

Elsbury, has helped many couples facing this dilemma. In her experience, most couples choose to sell both homes and pool resources to buy a new home that meets their blended family's needs without any past memories.

"We usually have a counseling session to determine their needs in location, school preferences, drive to work, country or town living, size, as in bedrooms, baths, living space and financial needs," she said. "That provides a good guide from the start."

Goff feels that by helping with the objective factors, it is easier for his clients to deal with the subjective factors.

"I can supply them with information about potential new school systems and about all of the other factors

important in any home buyer's decision-making process," he said.

"I help them consider the costs and benefits associated with either scenario and can give them a black and white picture of the real estate factors involved, answering such questions as: 'How much gain will I have when I sell my house or sell both houses? What will my costs be in buying a new house?'"

Working with a blended family requires more acute listening skills than working with most buyers and getting to know the family and their needs is critically important, Goff said.

"But really, it's just about answering their questions and understanding their needs, like any other buyer," Goff said.

## Rope lighting



PHOTO BY HOME & GARDEN TELEVISION

Are you looking for a source of great accent lighting versatile enough to be used both indoors and out? Well, look no further, because rope lighting is exactly what you need. Rope light is the generic term for a type of accent light manufactured in long tubes, as shown above mounted behind decorative bars. A rope light consists of numerous small lights housed in a resin tube. Rope lights can be used in lengths up to 150 feet. Rope lights are very economical to use. Although the bulbs are not meant for replacement, most rope lights are rated for about 25,000 hours of usage, which translates to more than a decade of normal use. Ten feet of rope light uses about the same energy as a 60-watt lightbulb.