

Alaska HomeWise

By CCHRC Staff

The Ask a Builder series is dedicated to answering some of the many questions Fairbanks residents have about building, energy and the many other parts of home life.

When building a home, why is proper orientation such a big deal?

Most home plans are designed for what is called 'street appeal,' meaning the house is designed to give a particular look from the street. However, here it's also important to look at the topography of the piece of property, solar orientation, location of your neighbor, shade, among other factors. At this latitude, we want to face as much toward the light as possible. Proper facing with proper window placement will maximize the natural light you receive while reducing your heating bill. The correct location and orientation will prevent water from pooling around your house in the spring and summer. If permafrost is present on site, drainage and shade from overhangs and vegetation can help keep ground stable.

Are there any environmentally friendly paints out there?

The good news about environmentally friendly paints is that the most toxic ingredient, lead, was phased out years ago. The bad news is, today, most paints still contain volatile organic compounds, also known as VOCs. These give off fumes that are not good for your health. Off gassing of these VOCs is often temporary, but can still be obnoxious. Some ingredients, such as formaldehyde, can be very toxic. Latex and water-based paints will have lower VOCs than oil-based paints. So when you are shopping for paint, look for cans labeled 'low VOC,' '0 VOC,' or 'no VOC.' However, if you find one, make sure the paint will perform the way you want it to for your particular application. Read the label carefully, talk to the store associates, take a sample home, etc.

There are also 'natural' paints available, but a lot of natural products are dangerous as well. These are ingredients such as linseed, citrus, soy oils, certain minerals, plant pigments, and even chalk can give off unwanted fumes. If you want to avoid fumes all together, and you don't mind having to repaint more often, you could try an old-fashioned alternative, milk-based paint. This type of paint is only good indoors, but uses non-toxic, inert ingredients, and it's inexpensive.

When is it okay to turn off the heat tape around pipes, and when do you want to turn it back on?

That's a tricky question because it depends on what our winter was like. Any time we get lots of snow, especially early on, the ground is a lot more insulated, and sometimes it doesn't freeze as deep. It also depends on how deep the pipes are, but I would say, just to be safe, you want to turn it on sometime in late October or early November and turn it off sometime in May. If you have any doubts, call one of the local excavation contractors. They are usually the first to know how deep the frost line is in the fall and to what depth the ground has thawed in the spring.

Alaska HomeWise articles promote home awareness for the Cold Climate Housing Research Center (CCHRC). If you have a question, e-mail us at akhomewise@cchrc.org. You can also call the CCHRC at (907) 457-3454