

Hire the Right Solar Contractor

Get at least three bids. It's always a good idea no matter what the project to get at least three bids for comparison. Asking for a specific set of system parameters in advance from all three contractors makes the final bids more comparable. Ask experienced friends or neighbors for assistance in understanding them.

Think about customer service. How knowledgeable is the salesperson? If you received a door flier or house call, do they have a solicitation permit from the City of Davis? Does the company appear to have a stake in your satisfaction? Beware companies that emphasize urgency.

Check licenses and trades with the state. Ask the salesperson if they have a CA Home Improvement Sales (HIS) license. Ask the installer for their contractor's license number if it isn't offered.

Go to the Contractors State Licensing Board at www.cslb.ca.gov to [verify their license](#) as current and active and to check on their classifications (solar, electrical, and/or roofing).

Ask about experience

- Ask if they have experience in solar and/or roofing. Don't forget to ask about the number of projects, years of experience, and the types of systems they've installed.
- Also remember to ask if they have worked with your particular roof type especially if you have a unique material.

Research reputation. Check the Better Business Bureau and visit websites such as Angie's List or Yelp for reviews. Look for stable or growing companies and ask for references from previous customers.

Get a thorough roof assessment. Discuss the condition of your roof with a licensed roofing contractor. Determine its remaining life to the extent possible and keep in mind that the lifespan of the typical roof and most solar systems is about 20 to 25 years.

- Ideally, make any needed roof repairs prior to installation (repairs or replacement can sometimes be limited to panel locations).
- While some installers offer a "remove and replace" clause in case the roof fails before the panels, it may come at a high price.
- Responsible contractors should not encourage you to install a solar system on an aging roof unless they agree to include a remove and replace clause at no extra cost.



Investigate system component quality. There are thousands of companies producing solar panels but only a few have strong long term prospects. Look for manufacturers that have been in business for a while and ask what their balance sheet looks like. Established companies are more likely to be around to back up their warranties. Quality brands are made in America, Canada, and overseas.

Understand system size. The size of your system in kilowatts depends on current and future electricity use, the “amenable” rooftop area (appropriate for locating system components), your production goals, and your budget. Residential rooftop systems generally range from 4 to 8 kilowatts but can run smaller or larger. Your contractor should recommend a size that fits you and your needs appropriately. Planning usage to stay within the top two rate tiers is a good measure.

Consider excess production and Net Energy Metering (NEM). If you produce more energy than you consume, the excess is fed into the grid and you get a credit at a set rate. That credit may be reduced or eliminated in the future by legislation, but connections made prior to July 1, 2017, are grandfathered in with PG&E for 20 years as long as the program does not fill up (CPUC Decision 14-03-041). Find out more at ValleyCleanEnergy.org.

Don't let shade deter you. Microinverters and optimizers are technologies that add a bit of cost but allow you to maximize production in some shaded environments or across multiple arrays. Tree trimming might solve your shade problem and your [right to trim is backed up by City of Davis ordinance](#). Sometimes shade is truly an obstacle.

Ask about available finance options. If you'll be financing your system outside of a regular loan, look for contractors that offer a full range of solutions to meet your unique needs including PACE and PPAs. Check out our “Solar: Ways to Save” Cool Solutions Planning Guide for more information about financing.

Insist upon reasonable warranties

- At a minimum, get a 1 year workmanship warranty so you're covered if the roof penetrations start leaking.
- Typically, warranties cover the production of panel modules for 25 years (keeping in mind that output usually drops by 20% by the end). Warranties for module construction and integrity are usually 10 to 12 years.
- Since the usual lifespan of a string inverter is about 10 to 15 years, you might consider paying a bit extra for an extended warranty (15 to 25 years) if your unit comes with the fairly standard 10 year base warranty.

Read your contract carefully. Discuss design and system elements until you are satisfied and feeling confident. Ask for and examine the first year monthly forecast of energy generation as part of your contract. Inquire about the percentage of installations in the company's local portfolio that have equaled or exceeded the forecast, and get explanations for those that didn't. Some companies actually guarantee that the system will produce as designed.

Stay engaged. Be available for questions throughout the installation and follow up. Good luck and thank you for contributing to our community's solar goals!

