Solar energy can be direct or indirect, or active or passive. How does solar energy work" is a question of which the answers can be classified also by focus type.

First, there are two approaches towards solar energy conversion into energy we may use, both involving the use of a solar panel. Let’s start with those shall we? These are

* **Solar thermal and**
* **Photovoltaic**

**Solar thermal**

The solar thermal method uses energy from the sun directly to generate heat. Solar panels can be used to collect heat from the sun to capture its heat and transfer it for water and space heating in buildings.

Commonly such panels are positioned to maximise absorption of heat from the sun throughout the day and contain tubing through which water circulates. This tubing is known as solar thermal collectors There is also an indirect method where not water but a non-toxic anti-freeze liquid is used. The sun warms this liquid which in turn transfers this heat to water held in a tank. Passive thermal building design is as simple as designing to maximise the sun’s use.

**Photovoltaic**

This method converts the sun’s power into electricity. This is the photovoltaic process.

* Solar cells, or photovoltaic cells are often silicon-based pieces of material that absorb the sun’s light. Not warmth, as in the thermal application
* Many of these solar cells are often combined in solar panels
* Numbers of solar panels can be combined and interlinked for greater power
* Solar energy excites the electrons in the solar cell and electricity is produced
* This electricity is in the form of direct current or DC
* DC however is not useable for most common purposes
* So, next DC power is transformed through an inverter to alternating current, or AC at 120 Volt, a common-use voltage
* A small amount of solar energy is lost in this DC to AC conversion but is now ready for distribution to household appliancesnight time use and reduced sunlight
* You may be connected to the regular power grid. It may be possible to feed any excess energy that your batteries cannot hold, back to the grid. In this way you may become a green contributor to a public utility.

A further classification that I need to cover in answering your question How does solar energy work? is this one.

**Direct and indirect solar energy**

**Direct solar energy**

Using direct solar power involves only one step in transforming it to useable energy, its electromagnetic radiation. Some examples of direct solar energy include

* Sunlight striking a solar cell by which electricity is immediately generated
* Sunlight that is absorbed by the dark surface warms water in solar thermal collectors
* Sunlight absorbed by a fibre optic cable that is fixed on the exterior of a building and lights the inside
* Amazingly a solar sail on a spacecraft can move it through the direct force of sunlight. How does solar energy work? Mysteriously it seems sometimes.

**Indirect solar energy**

You probably guessed it! This process involves more than one step from sunlight to useable energy. Here are some examples

* I mentioned photosynthesis already. Plants convert sunlight into chemical energy, including carbon. Biofuel can be made from them as well as methane gas and hydrogen without waiting billions of years for them to turn into [fossil fuels](http://www.alternate-energy-sources.com/fossil-fuels-as-energy-sources.html), a very indirect method indeed!
* Hydroelectric dams and wind turbines derive energy from solar-caused wind, rain and other climatic interactions
* Ocean thermal energy is indirect too through its solar-caused differences in temperatures at various depths and wave movement by the wind

After all this, I still have not answered your question: "What is solar energy?" as fully as I might. So, keep moving along with me please…

**Active and passive solar energy systems**

**Passive**

A passive system only requires direct sunlight without the aid of any other energy. Sunlight warming an area through a window for example is used in housing and hothouses. Passive solar water heaters for instance use no pump to circulate its water.

**Active**

And yes, active systems do use the aid of energy besides that of the sun to make them work. Active systems may have electronic tracking devices to maximise sunlight absorption. They may use electric pumps, air blowers, shutters and so on. They can be computer-controlled.

Another way of answering "How does solar energy work?" is by **focus type of the solar collector**.

**Focus types**

When very high temperatures are required from solar radiation, its normally diffuse, non-concentrated, light is not enough. Solar energy applications can therefore also be classified as

* **Point focus**
* **Line focus**
* **Non-focus**

**Point focus**

A saucer-shaped, or parabolic, dish is used to focus diffuse sunlight into a concentrated point of solar radiation. At this point a cluster of solar cells, or a thermal energy receiver convert this radiation into electricity.

**Line focus**

Same principle as point focus except that here a trough shaped parabolic dish or line of mirrors concentrate the sun’s light which is then converted into electricity.

**Non-focus**

These systems are those we most commonly think of as solar collectors. Solar thermal panels and solar cell panels are among these. It is an advantage that these systems can use diffuse sun light without further adaptation as above. Concentrating sunlight is of course a more indirect use of solar energy. And greater technological complexity often means higher costs.

Well, that’s it. The basics of how solar energy works. Of course this is only one bit of knowledge that you need if you want to choose the best solar hot water heater, solar energy unit, or even a solar backpack!

You also need to know more if you wish to make your own solar energy system.

Wait, there’s more…

Remember, asking how does solar energy work is not enough. Not if you want a truly sustainable world where all people flourish.

A friend of mine, who is a mother of a son with a disability, visited my web site. Not because she wanted to know theanswers to how does solar energy work? She asked me to expand on "the link between disability and environment" and "how we're all 'cactus' if we don't get our act together and start to take care of one another". My sentiments exactly. I’ll keep reminding you of that.

There’s an art to living with limits, dependency and fragility. Focus on that, take direct action and don’t be passive. It’s called sustainable living.

Solar Energy **Advantages** and the **Other Side**

Solar energy advantages - these come in many forms, ranging from selling power back to the grid to selling your 'green tags.' But, as always there are two sides to the story. These days, you can charge your camera via a small solar battery charger on your bag while climbing in the rocky mountains, but it might take you several months before you get a tax rebate for your roof panels.

**Lets go over some of the pros and cons.**

Firstly, there is the eco friendly aspect of solar energy. As long as the sun is shining, you are collecting energy. Solar panels produce no pollution while they are collecting sunlight energy. This is 'clean and green' energy - but it comes at a price.

There is a high initial purchase price on most solar energy systems. They can take between 5-15 years before they pay themselves off in with energy bill savings and start earning you money.

Once installed, solar cells are relatively low maintenance. They have no moving parts, causing them to have a long life(estimated at 50 years.) The panels themselves are made mostly of silicon, (like a window.) This means that, (like windows) they can withstand harsh weather - strong sunlight, wind and rain.

The energy created by the solar cells can be used for powering many types of appliances, from battery charges to fridges to cars. This energy can be acessed anywhere there is sunlight, and there is no size limitation. From tiny solar collectors able recharge your ipod or camera, to giant 'solar farms' the effiency is the same. (Provided you are using the same type of cell.)

Governments see solar power as a valuable resource. It is flexible in that it can be home owner installed and managed. House owners can have sell power back to the grid, or get tax rebates. To encourage home solar power, many governments and states have incentive rojects. They make it cheaper to buy solar panels through rebates and offer cash back on solar energy purchases.

Another solar energy advantage comes from solar energy being such a high growth market (a 20% 2006\*) Companies are spending lots more money developing and improving solar technology. As solar panels get less expensive and more efficient, the 'break-even' time gets shorter.

However, solar collectors are currently quite ineffecient - about 12% of sun energy hitting a panel is actually converted into energy. This means that a large area of your roof (or somewhere on your land) is need to create enough energy to power your house. This can be aesthetically a problem if you live in the city, though for people in the country with space to spare this is seldom an issue.

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| Discover Your Solar Energy Potential |

There are two ways in which solar energy 'works' - that is, works for us.

1. We can trap the heat from the sun and use it. (Solar Thermal or Solar Hot Water)

2. We can take the energy from the sun and turn it into electricity. (otherwise known as photovoltaics)

The sun radiates an incredible amount of energy every day. Less than an hour of earth's sunlight can supply all humanity's needs for a year.

**Solar Energy - Photovoltaics and Electricity**

The way photovoltaic panels work is by using the photons, or packages of sun energy to set off a molecular reaction. Silicon is doped with boron to create molecules that shed an electron when sun strikes it.

This 'photovoltaic effect' was actually discovered in 1839. When the electrons are free, they form a flow of electrons, otherwise known as electricity.

Recently, other substances than silicon have been used to create the photovoltaic effect. This is a fast growing area of science.

However, when you put solar electric panels on your roof, you are only using a small amount of the solar power available.

Typically, photovoltaic, or solar electric panels are 10-20% efficient. This means about 10-20% of the energy that strikes the panels actually gets converted into electricity for your use.

This efficiency is gradually improving as different companies research and develop their solar technology.

**Solar Hot Water - the Sun's Heat**

Using the sun's heat is the other way to harness solar energy. Solar hot water involves putting panels made up of small tubes in the sunlight. These tubes are filled with a liquid.

As the sun heats them, they either move naturally with the change in temperature (passive systems) or the liquid is circulated by a pump (active systems.)

Closed loop solar hot water systems circulate the same fluid always. This fluid then transfers it's heat to your hot water.

Open loop systems circulate the actual water and heat it directly. Solar Thermal uses the sun's heat differently. Using mirrors, sunlight is concentrated onto a pipe filled with liquid.

As this liquid heats up, it moves a motor. This is motor is often a stirling engine. Solar thermal is a fast growing solar technology and some large power plants have been built in the desert using these principles.

Types of Solar Hot Water Systems

All types of solar hot water systems work simply by putting water in a place where the sun can heat it. There are two types of water heaters:

**Flat Plate Collectors (using water in pipes)

Batch Collectors (water in tanks.)**

**Flat Plate Collectors** circulate water through black pipes housed in a special panel. This panel has glass on top for the sun's light to shine through, and is insulated on the bottom and sides to prevent heat from escaping. Sometimes the water is heated directly, and sometimes another fluid such as antifreeze is used. This other fluid then transfers its heat to water via a heat exchanger. Flat plate collectors are better suited to larger houses or pools, as they can supply large amounts of hot water.

A **Batch Collector** is simply a water-filled tank, painted black and insulated by glass. The black outside of the tank allows heat to be absorbed more easily. The glass insulation prevents heat from escaping from the tank. Batch collectors tend to be more reliable and cost effective as they have no moving parts, pumps or controls. They use the house's water pressure to move water through the system. One thing to consider is that the roof may need strenthening depending on the size of the system.

There are many other categories of solar hot water heaters. However, they all use this same basic principle - solar energy creates hot water.

Types of Photovoltaic Systems

There are many different types of photovoltaic systems. Some systems work better than others depending on your needs. Here are the main ones.

#### Stand Alone

These are photovoltaic panels with no battery system. They work when the sun is shining, but if it is cloudy or nightime, they produce no electricity. This type of system is simple and cost effective to set up, and is good for remote locations.

However they aren't suitable for homes where you want power round the clock.

#### Grid Tied

These systems use solar energy as it is created. When the sun isn't shining, power is supplied from the grid. When photovoltaic panels are supplying more energy than you are using, this power can be sold back to the grid. You can literally spin your power meter backwards.

#### Remote System with Battery Backup

This is popular for remote areas outside the grid. Energy is gathered from the sun and stored in batteries. This way, when there is no sunshine, battery power can be used. Often these systems have additional generator backup to allow for several days of no sunshine.

#### Grid Tied with Battery Backup

solar energy stored in batteries can be used at nightime. Using net metering, unused solar power can be sold back to the grid. With this system, you will have power even if your neighborhood has lost power.

# Solar energy

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jump to: [navigation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#mw-head), [search](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#p-search)

*This article is about all uses of solar energy. For the journal, see* [*Solar Energy Journal*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Energy_Journal)*. For generation of electricity using solar energy, see* [*Solar power*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_power)*.*







[Nellis Solar Power Plant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nellis_Solar_Power_Plant) in the United States, one of the largest [photovoltaic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoltaics) power plants in [North America](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_America).

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| [**Renewable energy**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renewable_energy) |
| Wind Turbine |
| [Biofuel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biofuel)[Biomass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biomass)[Hydroelectricity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydroelectricity)**Solar energy**[Tidal power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tidal_power)[Wave power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wave_power)[Wind power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wind_power) |
| [v](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template%3ARenewable_energy_sources) **·** [d](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template_talk%3ARenewable_energy_sources) **·** [e](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Template:Renewable_energy_sources&action=edit) |

**Solar energy**, radiant [light](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light) and [heat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat) from the [sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun), has been harnessed by humans since [ancient times](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_history) using a range of ever-evolving technologies. Solar [radiation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-ionizing_radiation), along with secondary solar-powered resources such as [wind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wind_power) and [wave power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wave_power), [hydroelectricity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydroelectricity) and [biomass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biomass), account for most of the available [renewable energy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renewable_energy) on earth. Only a minuscule fraction of [the available solar energy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_constant) is used.

[Solar powered](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_power) electrical generation relies on [heat engines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat_engine) and [photovoltaics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoltaics). Solar energy's uses are limited only by human ingenuity. A partial list of solar applications includes space heating and cooling through [solar architecture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_architecture), [potable water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potable_water) via [distillation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_still) and [disinfection](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_water_disinfection), [daylighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daylighting), [solar hot water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_hot_water), [solar cooking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_cooking), and high temperature process heat for industrial purposes.To harvest the solar energy, the most common way is to use [solar panels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_panel).

Solar technologies are broadly characterized as either [passive solar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passive_solar) or [active solar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_solar) depending on the way they capture, convert and distribute solar energy. Active solar techniques include the use of photovoltaic panels and [solar thermal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_thermal_energy) collectors to harness the energy. Passive solar techniques include orienting a building to the Sun, selecting materials with favorable [thermal mass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_mass) or light dispersing properties, and designing spaces that [naturally circulate air](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ventilation_%28architecture%29).

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| Contents[[hide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy)]* [1 Energy from the Sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Energy_from_the_Sun)
* [2 Applications of solar technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Applications_of_solar_technology)
	+ [2.1 Architecture and urban planning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Architecture_and_urban_planning)
	+ [2.2 Agriculture and horticulture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Agriculture_and_horticulture)
	+ [2.3 Solar lighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Solar_lighting)
	+ [2.4 Solar thermal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Solar_thermal)
		- [2.4.1 Water heating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Water_heating)
		- [2.4.2 Heating, cooling and ventilation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Heating.2C_cooling_and_ventilation)
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	+ [2.7 Solar vehicles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Solar_vehicles)
* [3 Energy storage methods](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Energy_storage_methods)
* [4 Development, deployment and economics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Development.2C_deployment_and_economics)
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* [7 Notes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#Notes)
* [8 References](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#References)
* [9 External links](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#External_links)
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## Energy from the Sun

*Main articles:* [*Insolation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insolation) *and* [*Solar radiation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_radiation)





About half the incoming solar energy reaches the Earth's surface.

The Earth receives 174 [petawatts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orders_of_magnitude_%28power%29%22%20%5Cl%20%22petawatt_.281015_watts.29%22%20%5Co%20%22Orders%20of%20magnitude%20%28power%29) (PW) of incoming solar radiation ([insolation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insolation)) at the upper [atmosphere](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth%27s_atmosphere).[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Smil_1991-0) Approximately 30% is reflected back to space while the rest is absorbed by clouds, oceans and land masses. The [spectrum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electromagnetic_spectrum) of solar light at the Earth's surface is mostly spread across the [visible](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visible_light) and [near-infrared](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near-infrared) ranges with a small part in the [near-ultraviolet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near-ultraviolet).[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-1)

Earth's land surface, [oceans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ocean) and atmosphere absorb solar radiation, and this raises their temperature. Warm air containing evaporated water from the oceans rises, causing [atmospheric circulation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atmospheric_circulation) or [convection](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convection). When the air reaches a high altitude, where the temperature is low, water vapor condenses into clouds, which rain onto the Earth's surface, completing the [water cycle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_cycle). The [latent heat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latent_heat) of water condensation amplifies convection, producing atmospheric phenomena such as [wind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wind), [cyclones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyclone) and [anti-cyclones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-cyclone).[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-2) Sunlight absorbed by the oceans and land masses keeps the surface at an average temperature of 14 [°C](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celsius).[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-3) By [photosynthesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photosynthesis) green plants convert solar energy into [chemical energy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chemical_energy), which produces food, wood and the [biomass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biomass) from which fossil fuels are derived.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-4)

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| **Yearly Solar fluxes & Human Energy Consumption** |
| Solar | 3,850,000 [EJ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joule#Multiples)[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Smil_2006.2C_p._12-5) |
| Wind | 2,250 EJ[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-6) |
| Biomass | 3,000 EJ[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-fao.org-7) |
| Primary energy use (2005) | 487 EJ[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-8) |
| Electricity (2005) | 56.7 EJ[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-9) |

The total solar energy absorbed by Earth's atmosphere, oceans and land masses is approximately 3,850,000 [exajoules](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joule%22%20%5Cl%20%22Multiples%22%20%5Co%20%22Joule) (EJ) per year.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Smil_2006.2C_p._12-5) In 2002, this was more energy in one hour than the world used in one year.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-10)[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-11) Photosynthesis captures approximately 3,000 EJ per year in biomass.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-fao.org-7) The amount of solar energy reaching the surface of the planet is so vast that in one year it is about twice as much as will ever be obtained from all of the Earth's non-renewable resources of coal, oil, natural gas, and mined uranium combined.[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-12)

From the table of resources it would appear that solar, wind or biomass would be sufficient to supply all of our energy needs, however, the increased use of biomass has had a [negative effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Issues_relating_to_biofuels) on global warming and dramatically increased food prices by diverting forests and crops into biofuel production.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-13) As [intermittent resources](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intermittent_power_source), solar and wind raise other issues.

Solar energy can be harnessed in different levels around the world. Depending on a geographical location the closer to the equator the more "potential" solar energy is available.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-14)

## Applications of solar technology





Average [insolation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insolation) showing land area (small black dots) required to replace the world primary energy supply with solar electricity. 18 TW is 568 Exajoule (EJ) per year. Insolation for most people is from 150 to 300 W/m2 or 3.5 to 7.0 kWh/m2/day.

Solar energy refers primarily to the use of [solar radiation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_radiation) for practical ends. However, all renewable energies, other than [geothermal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geothermal_power) and [tidal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tidal_power), derive their energy from the sun.

Solar technologies are broadly characterized as either passive or active depending on the way they capture, convert and distribute sunlight. Active solar techniques use photovoltaic panels, pumps, and fans to convert sunlight into useful outputs. Passive solar techniques include selecting materials with favorable thermal properties, designing spaces that naturally circulate air, and referencing the position of a building to the Sun. Active solar technologies increase the supply of energy and are considered [supply side](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supply_side) technologies, while passive solar technologies reduce the need for alternate resources and are generally considered demand side technologies.[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-IEA_Solar_Thermal-15)

### Architecture and urban planning

*Main articles:* [*Passive solar building design*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passive_solar_building_design) *and* [*Urban heat island*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_heat_island)





[Darmstadt University of Technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darmstadt_University_of_Technology) in [Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany) won the 2007 [Solar Decathlon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Decathlon) in [Washington, D.C.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington%2C_D.C.) with this [passive house](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passive_house) designed specifically for the humid and hot subtropical climate.[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-16)

Sunlight has influenced building design since the beginning of architectural history.[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Schittich_2003-17) Advanced solar architecture and urban planning methods were first employed by the [Greeks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greece) and [Chinese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feng_shui#Archaeology), who oriented their buildings toward the south to provide light and warmth.[[19]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-18)

The common features of [passive solar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passive_solar) architecture are orientation relative to the Sun, compact proportion (a low surface area to volume ratio), selective shading (overhangs) and [thermal mass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_mass_%28Building%29).[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Schittich_2003-17) When these features are tailored to the local climate and environment they can produce well-lit spaces that stay in a comfortable temperature range. [Socrates'](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates) Megaron House is a classic example of passive solar design.[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Schittich_2003-17) The most recent approaches to solar design use computer modeling tying together [solar lighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daylighting), [heating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_heating) and [ventilation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_air_conditioning) systems in an integrated [solar design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_design) package.[[20]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-19) [Active solar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_solar) equipment such as pumps, fans and switchable windows can complement passive design and improve system performance.

Urban heat islands (UHI) are metropolitan areas with higher temperatures than that of the surrounding environment. The higher temperatures are a result of increased absorption of the Solar light by urban materials such as asphalt and concrete, which have lower [albedos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albedo) and higher [heat capacities](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat_capacity) than those in the natural environment. A straightforward method of counteracting the UHI effect is to paint buildings and roads white and plant trees. Using these methods, a hypothetical "cool communities" program in [Los Angeles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Angeles) has projected that urban temperatures could be reduced by approximately 3 °C at an estimated cost of US$1 billion, giving estimated total annual benefits of US$530 million from reduced air-conditioning costs and healthcare savings.[[21]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Heat_Islands-20)

### Agriculture and horticulture





[Greenhouses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenhouses) like these in the Westland municipality of the [Netherlands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlands) grow vegetables, fruits and flowers.

[Agriculture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agriculture) and [horticulture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horticulture) seek to optimize the capture of solar energy in order to optimize the productivity of plants. Techniques such as timed planting cycles, tailored row orientation, staggered heights between rows and the mixing of plant varieties can improve crop yields.[[22]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-21)[[23]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-22) While sunlight is generally considered a plentiful resource, the exceptions highlight the importance of solar energy to agriculture. During the short growing seasons of the [Little Ice Age](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Ice_Age), French and [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_power_in_the_United_Kingdom) farmers employed fruit walls to maximize the collection of solar energy. These walls acted as thermal masses and accelerated ripening by keeping plants warm. Early fruit walls were built perpendicular to the ground and facing south, but over time, sloping walls were developed to make better use of sunlight. In 1699, [Nicolas Fatio de Duillier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolas_Fatio_de_Duillier) even suggested using a [tracking mechanism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_tracker) which could pivot to follow the Sun.[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-23) Applications of solar energy in agriculture aside from growing crops include pumping water, drying crops, brooding chicks and drying chicken manure.[[25]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-24)[[26]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Leon_2006-25) More recently the technology has been embraced by vinters, who use the energy generated by solar panels to power grape presses.[[27]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-26)

[Greenhouses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenhouse) convert solar light to heat, enabling year-round production and the growth (in enclosed environments) of specialty crops and other plants not naturally suited to the local climate. Primitive greenhouses were first used during Roman times to produce [cucumbers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cucumbers) year-round for the Roman emperor [Tiberius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiberius).[[28]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-27) The first modern greenhouses were built in Europe in the 16th century to keep exotic plants brought back from explorations abroad.[[29]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-28) Greenhouses remain an important part of horticulture today, and plastic transparent materials have also been used to similar effect in [polytunnels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polytunnel) and [row covers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Row_cover).

### Solar lighting





Daylighting features such as this [oculus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oculus) at the top of the [Pantheon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantheon%2C_Rome), in [Rome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rome), Italy have been in use since antiquity.

The history of lighting is dominated by the use of natural light. The Romans recognized a [right to light](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right_to_light) as early as the [6th century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpus_Juris_Civilis) and English law echoed these judgments with the Prescription Act of 1832.[[30]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-29)[[31]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-30) In the 20th century artificial [lighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lighting) became the main source of interior illumination but daylighting techniques and hybrid solar lighting solutions are ways to reduce energy consumption.

[Daylighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daylighting) systems collect and distribute sunlight to provide interior illumination. This passive technology directly offsets energy use by replacing artificial lighting, and indirectly offsets non-solar energy use by reducing the need for [air-conditioning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HVAC#Air_conditioning).[[32]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Tzempelikos_2007-31) Although difficult to quantify, the use of [natural lighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunlight#Effects_on_human_health) also offers physiological and psychological benefits compared to [artificial lighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lighting#Health_effects).[[32]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Tzempelikos_2007-31) Daylighting design implies careful selection of window types, sizes and orientation; exterior shading devices may be considered as well. Individual features include sawtooth roofs, [clerestory windows](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clerestory), light shelves, [skylights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daylighting#Skylights) and [light tubes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light_tube). They may be incorporated into existing structures, but are most effective when integrated into a [solar design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passive_solar_building_design) package that accounts for factors such as [glare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light_pollution#Glare), heat flux and [time-of-use](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electricity_meter#Time_of_day_metering). When daylighting features are properly implemented they can reduce lighting-related energy requirements by 25%.[[33]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-ASHRAE_windows-32)

[Hybrid solar lighting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybrid_solar_lighting) is an [active solar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_solar) method of providing interior illumination. HSL systems collect sunlight using focusing mirrors that [track the Sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_tracker) and use [optical fibers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optical_fiber) to transmit it inside the building to supplement conventional lighting. In single-story applications these systems are able to transmit 50% of the direct sunlight received.[[34]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-hybrid_lighting-33)

Solar lights that charge during the day and light up at dusk are a common sight along walkways.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

Although [daylight saving time](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daylight_saving_time) is promoted as a way to use sunlight to save energy, recent research has been limited and reports contradictory results: several studies report savings, but just as many suggest no effect or even a net loss, particularly when [gasoline](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gasoline) consumption is taken into account. Electricity use is greatly affected by geography, climate and economics, making it hard to generalize from single studies.[[35]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-34)

### Solar thermal

*Main article:* [*Solar thermal energy*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_thermal_energy)

Solar thermal technologies can be used for water heating, space heating, space cooling and process heat generation.[[36]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-35)

#### Water heating

*Main articles:* [*Solar hot water*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_hot_water) *and* [*Solar combisystem*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_combisystem)





Solar water heaters facing the [Sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun) to maximize gain.

Solar hot water systems use sunlight to heat water. In low geographical latitudes (below 40 degrees) from 60 to 70% of the domestic hot water use with temperatures up to 60 °C can be provided by solar heating systems.[[37]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-36) The most common types of solar water heaters are evacuated tube collectors (44%) and glazed flat plate collectors (34%) generally used for domestic hot water; and unglazed plastic collectors (21%) used mainly to heat swimming pools.[[38]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-37)

As of 2007, the total installed capacity of solar hot water systems is approximately 154 [GW](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watt#Multiples).[[39]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-SWH_2008-38) China is the world leader in their deployment with 70 GW installed as of 2006 and a long term goal of 210 GW by 2020.[[40]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Renewables_2007-39) Israel and [Cyprus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus) are the per capita leaders in the use of solar hot water systems with over 90% of homes using them.[[41]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Environment_California_SWH-40) In the United States, Canada and Australia heating swimming pools is the dominant application of solar hot water with an installed capacity of 18 GW as of 2005.[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-IEA_Solar_Thermal-15)

#### Heating, cooling and ventilation

*Main articles:* [*Solar heating*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_heating)*,* [*Thermal mass*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_mass)*,* [*Solar chimney*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_chimney)*, and* [*Solar air conditioning*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_air_conditioning)





Solar House #1 of [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts_Institute_of_Technology) in the United States, built in 1939, used [seasonal thermal storage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasonal_thermal_storage) for year-round heating.

In the United States, [heating, ventilation and air conditioning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HVAC) (HVAC) systems account for 30% (4.65 EJ) of the energy used in commercial buildings and nearly 50% (10.1 EJ) of the energy used in residential buildings.[[33]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-ASHRAE_windows-32)[[42]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-41) Solar heating, cooling and ventilation technologies can be used to offset a portion of this energy.

Thermal mass is any material that can be used to store heat—heat from the Sun in the case of solar energy. Common thermal mass materials include stone, cement and water. Historically they have been used in arid climates or warm temperate regions to keep buildings cool by absorbing solar energy during the day and radiating stored heat to the cooler atmosphere at night. However they can be used in cold temperate areas to maintain warmth as well. The size and placement of thermal mass depend on several factors such as climate, daylighting and shading conditions. When properly incorporated, thermal mass maintains space temperatures in a comfortable range and reduces the need for auxiliary heating and cooling equipment.[[43]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-42)

A solar chimney (or thermal chimney, in this context) is a passive solar ventilation system composed of a vertical shaft connecting the interior and exterior of a building. As the chimney warms, the air inside is heated causing an [updraft](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Updraft) that pulls air through the building. Performance can be improved by using glazing and thermal mass materials in a way that mimics greenhouses.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

[Deciduous](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deciduous) trees and plants have been promoted as a means of controlling solar heating and cooling. When planted on the southern side of a building, their leaves provide shade during the summer, while the bare limbs allow light to pass during the winter.[[44]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-43) Since bare, leafless trees shade 1/3 to 1/2 of incident solar radiation, there is a balance between the benefits of summer shading and the corresponding loss of winter heating.[[45]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-44) In climates with significant heating loads, deciduous trees should not be planted on the southern side of a building because they will interfere with winter solar availability. They can, however, be used on the east and west sides to provide a degree of summer shading without appreciably affecting winter solar gain.[[46]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-45)

#### Water treatment

*Main articles:* [*Solar still*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_still)*,* [*Solar water disinfection*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_water_disinfection)*,* [*Solar desalination*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_desalination)*, and* [*Solar Powered Desalination Unit*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Powered_Desalination_Unit)





Solar water disinfection in [Indonesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indonesia)





Small scale solar powered sewerage treatment plant.

Solar distillation can be used to make [saline](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saline_water) or [brackish water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brackish_water) potable. The first recorded instance of this was by 16th century Arab alchemists.[[47]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Tiwari_2003-46) A large-scale solar distillation project was first constructed in 1872 in the [Chilean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chile) mining town of Las Salinas.[[48]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Daniels_1964-47) The plant, which had solar collection area of 4,700 m2, could produce up to 22,700 [L](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liters) per day and operated for 40 years.[[48]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Daniels_1964-47) Individual [still](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Still) designs include single-slope, double-slope (or greenhouse type), vertical, conical, inverted absorber, multi-wick, and multiple effect.[[47]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Tiwari_2003-46) These stills can operate in passive, active, or hybrid modes. Double-slope stills are the most economical for decentralized domestic purposes, while active multiple effect units are more suitable for large-scale applications.[[47]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Tiwari_2003-46)

Solar water [disinfection](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disinfection) (SODIS) involves exposing water-filled plastic [polyethylene terephthalate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyethylene_terephthalate) (PET) bottles to sunlight for several hours.[[49]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-48) Exposure times vary depending on weather and climate from a minimum of six hours to two days during fully overcast conditions.[[50]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-SODIS_CDC-49) It is recommended by the [World Health Organization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Health_Organization) as a viable method for household water treatment and safe storage.[[51]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-50) Over two million people in developing countries use this method for their daily drinking water.[[50]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-SODIS_CDC-49)

Solar energy may be used in a water stabilisation pond to treat [waste water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waste_water) without chemicals or electricity. A further environmental advantage is that [algae](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algae) grow in such ponds and consume [carbon dioxide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carbon_dioxide) in photosynthesis, although algae may produce toxic chemicals that make the water unusable.[[52]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-pmid18653962-51)[[53]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-pmid14510225-52)

#### Cooking

*Main article:* [*Solar cooker*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_cooker)





The Solar Bowl in [Auroville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auroville), [India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India), concentrates sunlight on a movable receiver to produce [steam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steam) for [cooking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooking).

Solar cookers use sunlight for cooking, drying and [pasteurization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasteurization). They can be grouped into three broad categories: box cookers, panel cookers and reflector cookers.[[54]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-53) The simplest solar cooker is the box cooker first built by [Horace de Saussure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_de_Saussure) in 1767.[[55]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-54) A basic box cooker consists of an insulated container with a transparent lid. It can be used effectively with partially overcast skies and will typically reach temperatures of 90–150 °C.[[56]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-55) Panel cookers use a reflective panel to direct sunlight onto an insulated container and reach temperatures comparable to box cookers. Reflector cookers use various concentrating geometries (dish, trough, Fresnel mirrors) to focus light on a cooking container. These cookers reach temperatures of 315 °C and above but require direct light to function properly and must be repositioned to track the Sun.[[57]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-56)

The [solar bowl](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_bowl) is a concentrating technology employed by the Solar Kitchen in [Auroville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auroville), [Pondicherry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pondicherry), [India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India), where a stationary spherical reflector focuses light along a line perpendicular to the sphere's interior surface, and a computer control system moves the receiver to intersect this line. Steam is produced in the receiver at temperatures reaching 150 °C and then used for process heat in the kitchen.[[58]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-57)

A reflector developed by [Wolfgang Scheffler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Scheffler) in 1986 is used in many solar kitchens. Scheffler reflectors are flexible parabolic dishes that combine aspects of trough and power tower concentrators. [Polar tracking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_tracker#Single_Axis_Trackers) is used to follow the Sun's daily course and the curvature of the reflector is adjusted for seasonal variations in the incident angle of sunlight. These reflectors can reach temperatures of 450–650 °C and have a fixed focal point, which simplifies cooking.[[59]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-58) The world's largest Scheffler reflector system in Abu Road, [Rajasthan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajasthan), India is capable of cooking up to 35,000 meals a day.[[60]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-59) As of 2008, over 2,000 large Scheffler cookers had been built worldwide.[[61]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-60)

#### Process heat

*Main articles:* [*Solar pond*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_pond)*,* [*Salt evaporation pond*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salt_evaporation_pond)*, and* [*Solar furnace*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_furnace)





STEP parabolic dishes used for steam production and electrical generation.

Solar concentrating technologies such as parabolic dish, trough and Scheffler reflectors can provide process heat for commercial and industrial applications. The first commercial system was the [Solar Total Energy Project](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Total_Energy_Project) (STEP) in Shenandoah, Georgia, USA where a field of 114 parabolic dishes provided 50% of the process heating, air conditioning and electrical requirements for a clothing factory. This grid-connected cogeneration system provided 400 kW of electricity plus thermal energy in the form of 401 kW steam and 468 kW chilled water, and had a one hour peak load thermal storage.[[62]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-61)

Evaporation ponds are shallow pools that concentrate dissolved solids through [evaporation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evaporation). The use of evaporation ponds to obtain salt from sea water is one of the oldest applications of solar energy. Modern uses include concentrating brine solutions used in leach mining and removing dissolved solids from waste streams.[[63]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-62)

[Clothes lines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clothes_line), [clotheshorses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clotheshorse), and clothes racks dry clothes through evaporation by wind and sunlight without consuming electricity or gas. In some states of the United States legislation protects the "right to dry" clothes.[[64]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-63)

Unglazed transpired collectors (UTC) are perforated sun-facing walls used for preheating ventilation air. UTCs can raise the incoming air temperature up to 22 °C and deliver outlet temperatures of 45–60 °C.[[65]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-UTC-64) The short payback period of transpired collectors (3 to 12 years) makes them a more cost-effective alternative than glazed collection systems.[[65]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-UTC-64) As of 2003, over 80 systems with a combined collector area of 35,000 [m2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Square_metre) had been installed worldwide, including an 860 m2 collector in [Costa Rica](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Costa_Rica) used for drying coffee beans and a 1,300 m2 collector in [Coimbatore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coimbatore), India used for drying marigolds.[[26]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Leon_2006-25)

### Electrical generation

*Main article:* [*Solar power*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_power)





The [PS10](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PS10_solar_power_tower) concentrates sunlight from a field of heliostats on a central tower.

Solar power is the conversion of sunlight into [electricity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electricity), either directly using [photovoltaics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoltaics) (PV), or indirectly using [concentrated solar power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concentrated_solar_power) (CSP). CSP systems use lenses or mirrors and tracking systems to focus a large area of sunlight into a small beam. PV converts light into electric current using the [photoelectric effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photoelectric_effect).

Commercial CSP plants were first developed in the 1980s, and the 354 MW [SEGS](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SEGS) CSP installation is the largest solar power plant in the world and is located in the Mojave Desert of California. Other large CSP plants include the [Solnova Solar Power Station](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solnova_Solar_Power_Station) (150 MW) and the [Andasol solar power station](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andasol_solar_power_station) (100 MW), both in Spain. The 80 MW [Sarnia Photovoltaic Power Plant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarnia_Photovoltaic_Power_Plant) in [Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada), is the [world’s largest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_photovoltaic_power_stations) [photovoltaic plant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoltaic_plant).

#### Experimental solar power

*Main articles:* [*Solar pond*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_pond) *and* [*Thermogenerator*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermogenerator)





Solar Evaporation Ponds in the [Atacama Desert](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atacama_Desert), South America

A [solar pond](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_pond) is a pool of salt water (usually 1–2 [m](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meter) deep) that collects and stores solar energy. Solar ponds were first proposed by Dr. Rudolph Bloch in 1948 after he came across reports of a lake in [Hungary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungary) in which the temperature increased with depth. This effect was due to salts in the lake's water, which created a "density gradient" that prevented [convection currents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convection_current). A prototype was constructed in 1958 on the shores of the Dead Sea near [Jerusalem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem).[[66]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-65) The pond consisted of layers of water that successively increased from a weak salt solution at the top to a [high salt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brine) solution at the bottom. This solar pond was capable of producing temperatures of 90 °C in its bottom layer and had an estimated solar-to-electric efficiency of two percent.

[Thermoelectric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermogenerator), or "thermovoltaic" devices convert a temperature difference between dissimilar materials into an electric current. First proposed as a method to store solar energy by solar pioneer Mouchout in the 1800s,[[67]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-66) thermoelectrics reemerged in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Under the direction of Soviet scientist [Abram Ioffe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abram_Ioffe) a concentrating system was used to thermoelectrically generate power for a 1 [hp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horsepower) engine.[[68]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-67) Thermogenerators were later used in the US space program as an energy conversion technology for powering deep space missions such as [Cassini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cassini%E2%80%93Huygens), [Galileo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_%28spacecraft%29) and [Viking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking_program). Research in this area is focused on raising the efficiency of these devices from 7–8% to 15–20%.[[69]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Tritt-68)

### Solar chemical

*Main article:* [*Solar chemical*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_chemical)

Solar chemical processes use solar energy to drive chemical reactions. These processes offset energy that would otherwise come from an alternate source and can convert solar energy into storable and transportable fuels. Solar induced chemical reactions can be divided into thermochemical or [photochemical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photochemical).[[70]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-69)

[Hydrogen production](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydrogen_production) technologies been a significant area of solar chemical research since the 1970s. Aside from electrolysis driven by photovoltaic or photochemical cells, several thermochemical processes have also been explored. One such route uses concentrators to split water into oxygen and hydrogen at high temperatures (2300-2600 °C).[[71]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-70) Another approach uses the heat from solar concentrators to drive the [steam reformation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steam_reforming) of natural gas thereby increasing the overall hydrogen yield compared to conventional reforming methods.[[72]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-71) Thermochemical cycles characterized by the decomposition and regeneration of reactants present another avenue for hydrogen production. The Solzinc process under development at the [Weizmann Institute](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weizmann_Institute_of_Science) uses a 1 MW solar furnace to decompose [zinc oxide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zinc_oxide) (ZnO) at temperatures above 1200 °C. This initial reaction produces pure zinc, which can subsequently be reacted with water to produce hydrogen.[[73]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-72)

[Sandia's](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandia_National_Laboratories) Sunshine to Petrol (S2P) technology uses the high temperatures generated by concentrating sunlight along with a [zirconia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zirconia)/[ferrite](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferrite_%28iron%29) catalyst to break down atmospheric carbon dioxide into oxygen and [carbon monoxide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carbon_monoxide) (CO). The carbon monoxide can then be used to synthesize conventional fuels such as methanol, gasoline and jet fuel.[[74]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-73)

A photogalvanic device is a type of battery in which the cell solution (or equivalent) forms energy-rich chemical intermediates when illuminated. These energy-rich intermediates can potentially be stored and subsequently reacted at the electrodes to produce an electric potential. The ferric-thionine chemical cell is an example of this technology.[[75]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-74)

Photoelectrochemical cells or PECs consist of a semiconductor, typically titanium dioxide or related titanates, immersed in an electrolyte. When the semiconductor is illuminated an electrical potential develops. There are two types of photoelectrochemical cells: photoelectric cells that convert light into electricity and photochemical cells that use light to drive chemical reactions such as [electrolysis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electrolysis).[[76]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-Bolton-75)

A combination thermal/photochemical cell has also been proposed. The Stanford PETE process uses solar thermal energy to raise the temperature of a thermionic metal to about 800C to increase the rate of production of electricity to electrolyse atmospheric CO2 down to carbon or carbon monoxide which can then be used for fuel production, and the waste heat can be used as well.[[77]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-76)

### Solar vehicles

*Main articles:* [*Solar vehicle*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_vehicle)*,* [*Solar-charged vehicle*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar-charged_vehicle)*,* [*Electric boat*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electric_boat)*, and* [*Solar balloon*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_balloon)





Australia hosts the [World Solar Challenge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Solar_Challenge) where solar cars like the Nuna3 race through a 3,021 km (1,877 mi) course from Darwin to Adelaide.

Development of a solar powered car has been an engineering goal since the 1980s. The [World Solar Challenge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Solar_Challenge) is a biannual solar-powered car race, where teams from universities and enterprises compete over 3,021 kilometres (1,877 mi) across central Australia from [Darwin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwin%2C_Northern_Territory) to [Adelaide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adelaide). In 1987, when it was founded, the winner's average speed was 67 kilometres per hour (42 mph) and by 2007 the winner's average speed had improved to 90.87 kilometres per hour (56.46 mph).[[78]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-77) The [North American Solar Challenge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_American_Solar_Challenge) and the planned [South African Solar Challenge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_African_Solar_Challenge) are comparable competitions that reflect an international interest in the engineering and development of solar powered vehicles.[[79]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-78)[[80]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-79)

Some vehicles use solar panels for auxiliary power, such as for air conditioning, to keep the interior cool, thus reducing fuel consumption.[[81]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-80)[[82]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-81)

In 1975, the first practical solar boat was constructed in England.[[83]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-82) By 1995, passenger boats incorporating PV panels began appearing and are now used extensively.[[84]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-83) In 1996, [Kenichi Horie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenichi_Horie) made the first solar powered crossing of the Pacific Ocean, and the *sun21* catamaran made the first solar powered crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in the winter of 2006–2007.[[85]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-84) There are plans to circumnavigate the globe in 2010.[[86]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-85)





Helios UAV in solar powered flight.

In 1974, the unmanned [AstroFlight Sunrise](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AstroFlight_Sunrise) plane made the first solar flight. On 29 April 1979, the [*Solar Riser*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Riser) made the first flight in a solar powered, fully controlled, man carrying flying machine, reaching an altitude of 40 feet (12 m). In 1980, the [*Gossamer Penguin*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gossamer_Albatross#Solar-powered_variants) made the first piloted flights powered solely by photovoltaics. This was quickly followed by the [*Solar Challenger*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Challenger) which crossed the English Channel in July 1981. In 1990 [Eric Scott Raymond](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Scott_Raymond) in 21 hops flew from California to North Carolina using solar power.[[87]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-86) Developments then turned back to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) with the [*Pathfinder*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NASA_Pathfinder) (1997) and subsequent designs, culminating in the [*Helios*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helios_Prototype) which set the altitude record for a non-rocket-propelled aircraft at 29,524 metres (96,864 ft) in 2001.[[88]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-87) The [*Zephyr*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QinetiQ_Zephyr), developed by [BAE Systems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BAE_Systems), is the latest in a line of record-breaking solar aircraft, making a 54-hour flight in 2007, and month-long flights are envisioned by 2010.[[89]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-88)

A [solar balloon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_balloon) is a black balloon that is filled with ordinary air. As sunlight shines on the balloon, the air inside is heated and expands causing an upward [buoyancy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buoyancy) force, much like an artificially heated [hot air balloon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_air_balloon). Some solar balloons are large enough for human flight, but usage is generally limited to the toy market as the surface-area to payload-weight ratio is relatively high.[[90]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-89)

[Solar sails](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_sail) are a proposed form of spacecraft propulsion using large [membrane mirrors](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Membrane_mirror) to exploit radiation pressure from the Sun. Unlike rockets, solar sails require no fuel. Although the thrust is small compared to rockets, it continues as long as the Sun shines onto the deployed sail and in the vacuum of space significant speeds can eventually be achieved.[[91]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-90)

The [High-altitude airship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-altitude_airship) (HAA) is an unmanned, long-duration, lighter-than-air vehicle using [helium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helium) gas for lift, and [thin film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thin_film) solar cells for power. The [United States Department of Defense](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Department_of_Defense) Missile Defense Agency has contracted [Lockheed Martin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lockheed_Martin) to construct it to enhance the [Ballistic Missile Defense System](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballistic_Missile_Defense_System) (BMDS).[[92]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-HAA-91) Airships have some advantages for solar-powered flight: they do not require power to remain aloft, and an airship's envelope presents a large area to the Sun.

## Energy storage methods

*Main articles:* [*Thermal mass*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_mass)*,* [*Thermal energy storage*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_energy_storage)*,* [*Phase change material*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phase_change_material)*,* [*Grid energy storage*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grid_energy_storage)*, and* [*V2G*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V2G)





Solar Two's thermal storage system generated electricity during cloudy weather and at night.

Solar energy is not available at night, and energy storage is an important issue because modern energy systems usually assume continuous availability of energy.[[93]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-92)

Thermal mass systems can store solar energy in the form of heat at domestically useful temperatures for daily or [seasonal durations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasonal_thermal_store). Thermal storage systems generally use readily available materials with high [specific heat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Specific_heat) capacities such as water, earth and stone. Well-designed systems can lower [peak demand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peak_demand), shift time-of-use to [off-peak](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/off-peak) hours and reduce overall heating and cooling requirements.[[94]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-93)[[95]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-94)

Phase change materials such as [paraffin wax](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraffin_wax) and [Glauber's salt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodium_sulfate#Thermal_storage) are another thermal storage media. These materials are inexpensive, readily available, and can deliver domestically useful temperatures (approximately 64 °C). The "Dover House" (in [Dover, Massachusetts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dover%2C_Massachusetts)) was the first to use a Glauber's salt heating system, in 1948.[[96]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-95)

Solar energy can be stored at high temperatures using [molten salts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molten_salt). Salts are an effective storage medium because they are low-cost, have a high specific heat capacity and can deliver heat at temperatures compatible with conventional power systems. The [Solar Two](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Solar_Project#Solar_Two) used this method of energy storage, allowing it to store 1.44 [TJ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joule#Multiples) in its 68 [m3](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cubic_metre) storage tank with an annual storage efficiency of about 99%.[[97]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-96)

Off-grid PV systems have traditionally used [rechargeable batteries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rechargeable_batteries) to store excess electricity. With grid-tied systems, excess electricity can be sent to the transmission [grid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grid-tied_electrical_system). [Net metering](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Net_metering) programs give these systems a credit for the electricity they deliver to the grid. This credit offsets electricity provided from the grid when the system cannot meet demand, effectively using the grid as a storage mechanism.[[98]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-97)

[Pumped-storage hydroelectricity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pumped-storage_hydroelectricity) stores energy in the form of water pumped when energy is available from a lower elevation reservoir to a higher elevation one. The energy is recovered when demand is high by releasing the water to run through a hydroelectric power generator.[[99]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-98)

## Development, deployment and economics

*Main article:* [*Deployment of solar power to energy grids*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deployment_of_solar_power_to_energy_grids)





A parabolic dish and [stirling engine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stirling_engine) system, which [concentrates sunlight](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concentrating_solar_power) to produce useful solar power.

Beginning with the surge in [coal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coal) use which accompanied the [Industrial Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution), energy consumption has steadily transitioned from wood and biomass to [fossil fuels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fossil_fuel). The early development of solar technologies starting in the 1860s was driven by an expectation that coal would soon become scarce. However development of solar technologies stagnated in the early 20th century in the face of the increasing availability, economy, and utility of coal and [petroleum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petroleum).[[100]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-99)

The [1973 oil embargo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_oil_crisis) and [1979 energy crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1979_energy_crisis) caused a reorganization of energy policies around the world and brought renewed attention to developing solar technologies.[[101]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-100)[[102]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-101) Deployment strategies focused on incentive programs such as the Federal Photovoltaic Utilization Program in the US and the Sunshine Program in Japan. Other efforts included the formation of research facilities in the US (SERI, now [NREL](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NREL)), Japan ([NEDO](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Energy_and_Industrial_Technology_Development_Organization)), and [Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_power_in_Germany) ([Fraunhofer Institute for Solar Energy Systems ISE](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fraunhofer_Society%22%20%5Co%20%22Fraunhofer%20Society)).[[103]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-102)

Commercial solar water heaters began appearing in the United States in the 1890s.[[104]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-103) These systems saw increasing use until the 1920s but were gradually replaced by cheaper and more reliable heating fuels.[[105]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-104) As with photovoltaics, [solar water heating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_water_heating) attracted renewed attention as a result of the oil crises in the 1970s but interest subsided in the 1980s due to falling petroleum prices. Development in the solar water heating sector progressed steadily throughout the 1990s and growth rates have averaged 20% per year since 1999.[[39]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_energy#cite_note-SWH_2008-38) Although generally underestimated, solar water heating and cooling is by far the most widely deployed solar technology with an estimated capacity of 154 GW as of 2007.