

Say goodbye to cave lighting this spring

As soon as the earth's orbit rolls around to where the sun comes shining through, a sudden transformation overtakes all of us living above the equator. Deprived of warmth and sunlight through the winter months, we tend to run outdoors and soak up as many rays as possible, even if the temperature is barely in the 50s. But if you think that you have to go outside for those golden rays this spring, go back inside...and realize what you can do to improve the quality of natural light in your home.

The very first step should involve looking at your interior window treatments. Those heavy drapes are great for insulating the house in the winter, but March is the time to pack them off to the dry cleaners and store them away until November. Replace them with light, translucent drapes, shades or blinds.

To really let in natural light, consider a skylight or roof window. While those who are pretty handy around the house can install these themselves, they're actually pretty affordable even when installed by a professional. Besides, they may even save you money in the long run. Adding natural light to rooms means less wasted electricity and light bulb replacements, and depending on the skylight's location, may lower heating bills in the winter. Spread out over the years, they're actually wise investments, and certainly add value to a home.

Roof windows are a nice addition anywhere, but are particularly appreciated in bedrooms. There's nothing like going to sleep under the stars, then waking up to the morning sun. Roof win-

dows are often larger than skylights, and installed so they can be opened for easy cleaning and ventilation. Usually a heavy-duty glass is used, with heat-control glazing to moderate the amount of warmth they add to the interior. Of course, they can also be fitted with shades or blinds. If you're thinking of turning the attic into livable space, a roof window is the place to start.

Skylights are more versatile than roof windows, as they come in all shapes and sizes, can direct light from one part of the roof to another area in the house and can be installed as either fixed or operable. Fixed, domed skylights are the most popular and affordable, though pyramid shapes and lean-to versions are getting more notice in new construction. They are usually made of acrylic, with different colors and shadings available; all are UV protected. Depending on your area, you may want to select single glazing, or dual glazing with an insulated airspace between the acrylic layers.

Perhaps the hottest new item in the skylight market is the flexible tube skylight. Easy to install, these skylights are set into the part of the roof that gets maximum exposure to the sun, after which the reflective tubing is curved through the attic or around the chimney before coming out in the desired ceiling. The fewer bends the better, but manufacturers report that even when curved at a nearly 90-degree angle, the natural light is still able to reflect through the tube to brighten a room.

Don't be like a vampire, afraid of the sun. Remember the classic '60s song and "Let the Sun Shine In."

—By Daniel Aspell, special



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