

Solar power coming to a store near you

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Lowe's product service associate manager, Roxy Ramirez , left and product service associate Jim Miner stock the first do-it-yourself home solar panel system by Andalay at Lowe's in the West Hills suburb of Los Angeles, Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2009. (AP Photo/Gus Ruelas)

(AP) -- Solar technology is going where it has never gone before: onto the shelves at retail stores where do-it-yourselfers can now plunk a panel into a shopping cart and bring it home to install.

Lowe's has begun stocking [solar panels](#) at its California stores and plans to roll them out across the country next year.

This shows how far the highest of the high-tech [alternative energy](#) technologies has come. Solar power is now accessible to anyone with a ladder, a power drill, and the gumption to climb up on a roof and install

the panels themselves.

For Lowe's, it's an opening into a new and potentially lucrative DIY business.

"There's definitely a growing market for this with the number of people moving toward energy efficient homes," spokesman Steven Salazar said.

Buyer be warned, however. The DIY part of solar goes beyond installation.

Professional installers typically handle all the necessary paperwork, like clearance from the local utility and applications for a bevy of government subsidies that can make the system a whole lot cheaper.

"You put solar panels on your roof without a permit, bad things happen to you," said Jeff Wolfe, CEO of solar installer groSolar. "The utility could shut off the power."

Lowe's will staff a kiosk near the panels that provides information on how to apply for rebates.

For anyone willing to tackle the paperwork, Akeena Solar promises a hassle-free installation that will immediately reduce the power you need to buy from the local utility.

Akeena Solar, Inc., based in Los Gatos, Calif., said it designed a system with the novice in mind.

"It's really not a big deal," said CEO Barry Cinnamon. "The most dangerous thing is learning about ladder safety."

The rectangular panels retail at \$893 a piece. They produce the same AC

power that runs in homes and plug directly into a circuit breaker.

During the day, the solar panels will act like a large battery, producing energy from the sun and pumping it through the circuit breaker to appliances inside. On cloudy days or at night, of course, homeowners will again draw 100 percent of their power from the grid.

To install, you'll need to carry the 40-pound panels to the roof and drill holes - two per panel - into the rafters. After adding a barrier to prevent leaks and a couple of brackets, the panels are bolted to the roof.

The home would need a dedicated circuit breaker, just like a washer and dryer.

One panel packs nowhere near the punch of a full solar system.

A typical solar system installed by a professional usually has 20 panels. Each Akeena panel will generate about 175 watts of electricity, about enough to power a flat screen television.

If you want more solar power, you can snap another panel to the first, kind of like Legos.

"People might want to put up one, see if it works. Then with their next paycheck, they may buy four more," Cinnamon said.

Lowe's is offering software that allows the homeowner to monitor the performance of each panel through the Internet. The panels are designed to withstand rough weather including hail storms, and they're backed with a 25-year warranty covering defects.

Cinnamon, who mounted the panels on his own home in San Francisco (though he hired a contractor to do the electrical work), said

homeowners can save a few thousand dollars, depending on the size of the system, by skipping a professional installer.

Rival home improvement store Home Depot did offer solar panels briefly this year as part of a pilot project, but those were developed for professional contractors and DIYers with a higher level of technical expertise. You can still buy the [solar system](#) on Home Depot's Web site.

The system offered by Lowe's is new territory for solar, putting a small system in reach of almost anyone.

"That's going to grab a whole lot of people who never thought of solar in their home," said Norman Deschamps, an independent analyst for SBI who specializes in the retail market for energy efficient renovations.

"The walk-in market is fundamentally new."

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