

Oregon is home to a number of reputable contractors with experience installing solar electric and solar water heating systems. Energy Trust maintains a list of licensed solar contractors (called trade allies) on our website at energytrust.org. These contractors have agreed to our program requirements and are therefore eligible to offer our incentives to their clients. You may hire the contractor of your choice from this list. However, we cannot endorse or guarantee their performance. It is your responsibility to interview and select your contractor carefully.

Questions to ask a potential solar contractor

Q: How many years of experience does your company have with solar installations?

A company or installer that has been in business a long time has demonstrated the ability to work with customers and compete effectively with other vendors. Another strategy is to request a reference list of past customers whose installations resemble the one you are considering. Ask previous customers if they would hire the contractor again, what they would have done differently, and to describe the contractor's limitations and strengths.

Q: What kind of solar experience do you have?

Would you hire an electrician to plumb your bathroom? While both solar electric and solar water heating systems require expertise in roof attachment and solar resource assessment, they are very different in functionality and installation. Be sure to ask how many installations the trade ally has completed for your particular type of system, and confirm that a solar electrician has worked on utility-interactive systems before. If you are planning on installing both a solar water heating and solar electric system, you may want a trade ally who can install the systems simultaneously.

Q: Where is your company located?

A trade ally located far from your installation site may charge for travel time and expenses. Distance also means a contractor may not be able to travel at short notice if you have a problem.

Q: What products does your company offer?

If you are looking for a particular style or brand of component, check to see that your contractor carries or is authorized to install what you want. Some contractor may offer only one brand of inverter, module or collector, or not have the training to install the product you need.

Q: What kind of warranty and maintenance agreement do you offer?

A system warranty is crucial in comparing bids. Energy Trust requires trade allies to provide a two-year system warranty that covers all labor for any repairs resulting from defects in equipment or contractor workmanship. An installer may offer longer warranties. However, it is critical that you ensure your contractor agreement is explicit about what issues the contractor will handle, and what service to expect should something go wrong.

How do I choose among competing bids?

You should take steps to ensure that all of the bids you receive are made on the same criteria. Where the system will be installed, the hardware used and performance and warranties of the system components can all have marked impact on the price of a system. For a PV system, bids should clearly state the size of the system and an estimate of the electricity the system will produce on an annual basis. Solar water heating bids should estimate the energy the system will save on an annual basis in kilowatt-hours or therms. Both should include all costs associated with the project, including hardware, installation, permitting, warranty and, for PV, connection to the grid. As with hiring any contractor, be sure to call several references provided by the contractor.

Most of the time, competing project bids will vary less than 5%. Remember, price is not as important a factor as trust. You want to have confidence that the company will stand behind its installation for at least two years, and hopefully twenty.

