

Metal roofs are growing in popularity because of their longevity and sustainability

Isaiah Industries

Think about it. If you are remodeling or repairing your home, you probably aren't going to use the same building materials that you would have used 20 years ago. Insulation, windows and siding have all improved to make us more comfortable and our homes more energy efficient.

But there's one area - and it's big one - that still lags behind in acceptance of the evolution of residential building materials. And that's roofing.

(Depending on its architecture, it's highly possible that more than half of the home's visual exterior is roof.)

"We have progressed to building materials that are more durable, and maybe more sustainable or maybe more beautiful. Metal roofing is the next step in the evolution of roofing. It's replacing the basic asphalt shingle and the technology from the mid- to late-1950s. That really hasn't changed except for maybe more colors and a thicker or thinner product," said Todd Miller, president of Isaiah Industries in Piqua, Ohio, a major manufacturer of metal roofing materials. The company's brand names include Classic Metal Roofing Systems, Kassel & Irons and Green American Home.

Metal roofs have many benefits. Durability and longevity are biggies. There are no open edges, which on traditional roofing can allow shingles to curl up, blow away or be exposed to water infiltration. Metal roofs are resistant to ugly staining by mold, algae and fungus. They help prevent the spread of forest fires to residential homes.

Also, roofs are coated with pigments that reflect away radiant heat. In addition, metal roofs are highly recyclable. Aluminum roofs have recycled content of 95 percent or more and steel and copper roofs of about 35 percent, according to Miller, who is also vice president of the nonprofit Metal Roof Alliance (MRA).

Today's metal roofs also do not look like the top of an old rusty tool shed. Metal roofs that resemble slate or shakes are very popular and many other styles and textures are available. Colors include a variety of browns, tans, grays, reds and greens. Chances are good you have driven or walked right by a house with a metal roof and weren't aware of its construction.

Metal roofs have been embraced in our country's extreme north and on both coasts more readily than in the Midwest and other areas. Miller said areas where traditional roofing material just didn't stand up as well became leaders in metal roofing use out of necessity.

"Honestly, if you were to ask me in 1985 as a manufacturer in Ohio about our product, I'd say I didn't know if we were ever going to sell any metal roofs in the state," said Miller. "But that has changed dramatically."

A construction study released last year by Dodge Data & Analytics backs up Miller's claim. Metal roofing saw a market share jump of about 8 percent in 2014 to 11 percent in 2015. Between 2014 and 2015, the total demand for metal roofing increased from 11.7 million squares to 17.7 million squares. Metal roofing is second only to asphalt shingle roofing, which dropped two points.

Metal roofs do initially cost more than traditional roofs, but can last far longer than other materials.

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"If a homeowner (in the Midwest) knows he will stay in a home at least 17 years when he will have to re-roof again, then metal makes a wise investment up front because an asphalt roof will probably cost double then what you paid today," said Miller. "But if a homeowner says he is not going to stay in this home more than a couple years, I'm pretty quick to tell him that I am not too sure a metal roof is the right product for them. I'm not going to stand in their way, but I am not sure it would make a lot of sense (from a financial standpoint)."

If you are a home seller with a bad roof and want to replace it before it goes on the market, you have a decision to make. The less expensive way, of course, is a traditional asphalt roof. But a metal roof can also be a selling point to a buyer who is aware of its value.

Miller also cites a recent housing phenomenon that is influencing homeowners' decisions to choose metal roofing for what he calls their "legacy homes."

"We have been seeing this since the great housing recession of 2008 and 2009," said Miller. " More and more homeowners are thinking of leaving their home to their kids or selling it at a low price to nieces or nephews. It's more of a European or Asian model than we have seen in the United States. A legacy house becomes more generational. And metal roofing makes sense for that. It becomes almost like a gift they give to the next generation that will take care of itself for years. It's a change in how we think about homes."

Skeptics still have some concerns about residential metal roofing, but Miller and the MRA hope to put those to rest. Homeowners often ask about noise.

Will it sound as if they are living in a popcorn machine when it rains or hails? The reality is that if installed properly with solid sheathing, a metal roof can actually silence noise from the outside, according to the MRA.

Some homeowners have also expressed concern about cell phone reception, although as Miller points out people shop at stores, eat at restaurants and work in buildings that have metal roofs all the time and have no problem.

Basically, Miller said if you have no concerns with your reception in your home now, you won't with a metal roof either. But if a house is in a more remote area, where "you have to go to a part of your house now to make a call to get closer to that tower," than a metal roof may be an issue.

If that is the case, Miller recommends booster devices available at electronic stores. But he also related the story of one metal roof owner who complained to his cell phone provider about the situation.

"The provider sent the homeowner a device free of charge that he was able to install in his home. The company didn't want to lose the homeowner as a customer. I don't know how common that is, but it worked for them."

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