

# The Pender Islands' First Eco-Homes Tour

By Cherie Thiessen

The exterior of Colin Hamilton and Wendy Lopatecki's straw bale and timber frame home by Thuja Wood Art.



If words like straw bale hybrid, micro hydro systems, non-toxic wood finishes, reclaimed old-growth red cedar and historic restoration carpentry get your pulse racing, it may be time to move to BC's Gulf Islands. More and more people on these fragile sylvan islands are beginning to build green, and last Labour Day weekend, Pender Islanders had a chance to view some of their constructions.

Cobworks on nearby Mayne Island could well have been the pioneer, holding a yearly eco-homes open house tour to help fund its international volunteer work, but it's Salt Spring Island's entrepreneurship many of us think of when we conjure up such a tour. The first of its annual Eco Living and Homes Tour

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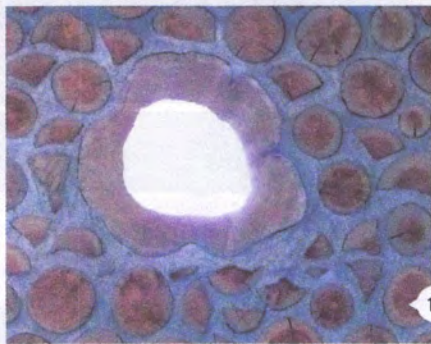
was held in the summer of 2007, offering a selection of 10 homes featuring alternative building technologies that support eco-friendly living.

According to one of the Pender Island organizers, Tracy Calvert of Calvert Wood-

works, Geuer Glass and Cobworks, it was Mary Reher of North Pender Island who suggested the tour when a group of local businesses brainstormed about possible fundraisers to help support the community hall. (The straw bale home owned by Mary and her partner, Andy Nowak, was featured in the July/August 2007 issue of *Cottage*.)

The activity raised \$2,655 for the hall, and may have created the Penders' first traffic jams, as visitors and locals nudged from site to site, visiting 10 homes, each of which showcased different construction and eco-living projects.

At one location, we stood in a heritage orchard, necks craning upward, as WeGo Solar, a local renewal energy system ▶



**1** An example of “found wood” making a decorative window frame at the Fosters’ cordwood home. **2** This bathroom utilizes low-flush plumbing. The walls are 50/50 drywall mud and white stucco. **3** The beginnings of a North Pender Faswall™ block home designed by Ken Rempel.

provider, explained two solar installations. In another, barely under construction, the designer, Ken Rempel, was on hand to explain the advantages of a Faswall™ block home. A good environmental option, these blocks are cement-bonded wood fibre with no foam or polystyrene. They dry stack, so installation is quick.

“A real plus is that you have a very healthy, mould-free environment,” Rempel told visitors. His company offers design and project management employing healthy house principles. Other sites featured timber frame homes in various stages of construction, utilizing different building components like straw bale, cob (a mixture of sand, clay and straw) and chipslip (clay slip and wood-chips).

While every eco-site was well visited, particularly popular was Wally and Patty Foster’s circular 1,400-square foot cordwood home with composting toilet, custom-made door and windows from reclaimed wood, radiant floor heating, sawdust insulation, and homemade standing seam metal roof made without nails or screws. With all the visitors quizzing him about his indoor composting toilet, Wally rarely made it out of the bathroom, even though the rest of the light-filled circle had a myriad of special features. He figures it cost them \$65,000 to lock up.

Another “hot property” was the imposing 2,880-square foot straw bale hybrid with traditional stud frame built by our own building inspector, primarily from wood milled on the site. Other green additions were low-

flush toilets and showerheads, and bamboo flooring in much of the house. The owners also hope to soon add a rainwater catchment system and greywater recycling.

Reher and Nowak’s straw bale home featured a “green” roof, and many artistic details such as tiles painted by family members in the downstairs bathroom, and stained glass designed and created by Geuer Glassworks.

There was no disappointment on September 6. The weather was passable, the tour

well organized, the homes well selected and the tickets sold out—much to the delight of the organizers and the community hall.

“It was wildly more successful than I thought,” Calvert told me. “We talked about 130 tickets being sold, but in the end it was much more than that: 177 was the official count. I am so pleased there is so much interest in natural building and that so many people came out to support the community hall.”

After ogling eight homes, I reeled home exhausted, but a younger sprinter could easily fit in the 10. How often, after all, do you have an opportunity to walk into those homes you’ve often seen from the road and wondered about?

If you want to organize an event like this in your community, Calvert says it’s not too difficult: “Everything went really smoothly, except next year we thought it would be good to have some kind of event in the evening that may include a speaker, a presentation and a discussion, just to wind it up.”

Be warned, tours like this can cost you a lot more than the price of a \$15 ticket. We’re already working on our rain catchment system and siting out a location for the composting toilet. ☹

## ON THE WEB

For more information on the tour or the builders, visit [www.ecohomesnetwork.com](http://www.ecohomesnetwork.com)

Editor's Pick

## Product

### Oooli Iced Organic Tea

For that long drive up to the cabin, pick up a refreshing iced tea by North Vancouver-based Oooli Beverages. Offering four varieties of all-natural, certified organic iced teas, which contain no artificial ingredients, flavours or colours, Oooli is looking to revitalize the bottled beverage section of your local grocery store.

Three of the four flavours are naturally sweetened with organic honey or cane sugar, and have 63–76 per cent less sugar than leading iced tea brands (which can contain up to 13 teaspoons of sugar per bottle!).

Try Unsweetened Oolong, Cranberry, Passion Mango or Pomegranate Ginger Blueberry for a cool, tangy and, most impor-

tantly, healthy refreshment. (My personal favourite was the cranberry flavour.) These delicious drinks are priced at \$2.99 per bottle, and are currently only available in BC.

[www.oooli.com](http://www.oooli.com)

