

Making Ripples

Solar Peppermint: Energy on the Go
by Amanda Bancroft

Shopping for solar panels is a lot more complicated than picking out curtains. Fortunately, solar panels aren't limited to your roof the way window curtains are generally confined to the windows. Solar devices have been diversifying for years, and can now be found in a wide range of sizes for various uses. Whether strapped to a backpack for charging a laptop while walking to class, or carried as a briefcase to generate electricity for a large number of appliances, solar panels are becoming easier to use and cheaper to buy.

When I first heard of solar products by "peppermint," I was excited that someone had finally cracked the code to generate solar power through the photosynthesis of mint plants. Nope. PeppermintEnergy.com is trying to make solar better, smarter, and totally accessible with its new line of products. Their prototype, Forty2, was built in South Dakota by founder Brian Gramm and his team with the following four goals: easy to use, portable solar power, technology agnostic, and better value than alternatives. Unlike gas generators, the Forty2 has no noise, smell, or fuel source, and can be used indoors in apartments or homes. There is nothing to assemble, as an "all in one" unit. It even works in the rain.

Forty2 is basically a giant briefcase-sized laptop, with a solar panel on each side. Underneath the panels are a set of lithium ion batteries, a power inverter, and an energy monitor, with three AC outlets on the side. It comes in three sizes, providing 250 Wh, 500 Wh, or 1,000 Wh of energy storage and weighing between 60 to 75 pounds. After charging the batteries for one-and-a-half to six hours, the Forty2 can keep a large TV going for up to 12 hours without sun or power appliances like a refrigerator.

The net price for the three sizes is \$979, \$1,399, and \$1,749 thanks to a federal tax credit on certain energy-efficient home improvements. That amounts to \$420 saved on the smallest unit!

The company has had several problems with shipping the Forty2. Damaged products from poor shipment practices are a huge downer not only for customers but for the increasing costs to the planet of manufacturing solar panels. With the chemicals and materials involved in production, solar power is not quite "clean," but at least its post-production use is cleaner than traditional non-renewable options. It's also a lot more flexible than a grid, aiding refugees worldwide.

"There are 3 billion people in the world who don't have access to reliable electricity, and half of those don't have access to any power at all," says Chris Maxwell, President. Peppermint is working on projects in places like Haiti to bring power to even the darkest situations, and help local entrepreneurs start up solar-powered businesses like cell phone charging stations. This minty fresh approach to solar can change the way we "plug in."

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