

Glass or Polycarbonate? The Six Factors

Mark Hanson of Ultraframe and Chair of the GGF's Conservatory Association offers guidance on optimising conservatory glazing performance.

For a conservatory, the choice of glazing used both in the roof and the side frames is critical to comfort levels. In this article we are concentrating on roof glazing which can be either polycarbonate or glass.

Polycarbonate is a product that has been credited with a major impact on the development of the mainstream conservatory market. Although sales of glass have been increasing, polycarbonate still accounts for around 50% of roofs.

Polycarbonate is a strong and forgiving product, easy to handle on site. It's properties are widely known across the sector – for those consumers buying conservatories perhaps with a tight budget, it is still the product of choice.

However, for consumers who have deeper pockets and particularly those who are second/third time buyers or who have inherited a conservatory and are upgrading it, glass tends to be the product of choice.

Whichever glazing material is ultimately selected, it's vital that a mental checklist is completed as the choice of material is influenced by six factors:

1. Regional climate

The intensity of the sun doesn't vary much across the length of

Great Britain but what does vary is the amount of sun which is effected by cloud formation (which is a function of variation's in geographic features eg sea, hills).

2. Orientation of the glazing to the sun

We all know south facing conservatories receive the most solar gain whilst north facing ones gain the least. However overhanging trees or adjoining houses on a southerly facing conservatory could cause it to be in shade.

3. Budget

There are huge variations in the cost of glazing materials which can make comparisons difficult for a homeowner.

4. Aesthetic choice

For most domestic properties, clear, low light reflective glass is the norm in the side windows whilst the roof usually has a wider variety of popular finishes and colours.

What is not always understood is that a tinted glazing finish will change the colour of everything in the room below. Light trans-



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mission figures vary enormously across differing specifications of polycarbonate and even between the same thickness from differing sheet extruders. It's important that the consumer understands the nuances of some of these elements before you order the glazing. (Swatch samples are a boon here for the sales person.)

5. Desired environment

People's requirements are different, and the start point is to find out how the conservatory will be used.

6. Ease of maintenance

Pilkington Activ used in the outer sheet of Ultraframe's Conservaglass is a true self cleaning glass which is made during the float glass process and utilises the sun's energy to burn off organic deposits whilst rain water more easily sheets off. Alternative 'easy

clean' coatings are sometimes applied to finished sealed units by hand and offer limited lifespans/guarantees due to the orientation and shading which can lead to patchy performance.

In practice – because of the general public's lack of knowledge and the variety of products available – there is a seventh factor and that is the agenda of the person who is selling either the glazing product (to the retailer) or selling

the conservatory (to the consumer). For example, one glass unit company is claiming outstanding solar control figures where 80% of the sun's energy is blocked out. Where prevention of overheating is the primary concern this type of glass may be appropriate but back up heating and lighting will be necessary in winter – is it acceptable to solve one problem and create others?

So, which product is the best?

Given the above variables there is no right solution and it's equally clear that one solution cannot be the best in every circumstance.

Understanding a client's needs and surveying the site to understand orientation/shading features will help a forward-thinking retailer to optimise glazing performance and hence generate the maximum consumer enjoyment. **f**

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