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Outdoor Oasis

Transform Your Blah Back Yard Into a Party Patio

By Melanie Medina

Dana Webster, his wife and their two children eat out about three times a week. Their favorite place to dine is a little joint near their Sweet Bottom Plantation home where they enjoy breezy summer nights and cool fall evenings dining al fresco on a limestone patio.

They're not eating at Atlanta's newest restaurant. As a matter of fact, the Websters don't even leave their house. They simply head straight to the outdoor kitchen they added to their back yard. "It's quite an elaborate renovation," Webster said.

Elaborate indeed. Webster's patio kitchen looks more like an outdoor bar at a five-star resort than someone's back yard. It includes a Thermador grill, limestone floors, a bar made from a cast-stone base, handmade light fixtures from Mexico and granite countertops. It's a perfect space for entertaining crowds or eating dinner with the kids.

The Websters are part of a growing number of Americans investing in outdoor living spaces, including kitchens, dens and other cozy rooms. Almost two-thirds of residential architects reported an increase in demand for outdoor kitchens, patios and decks, according to a June 2006 report from The American Institute of Architects' Home Design Trends Survey. That's a significant increase from just a year ago, when nearly 50 percent of architects surveyed reported an increase.

What's driving this trend? Laurie Jenkins, designer and founder of Laurie Bell Fashion Accessories for Outdoor Rooms, attributes the growth to a combination of factors ranging from the population shift to the Sunbelt states — whose climates are more suitable for outdoor entertaining — to rising real estate values.

"Our climate is better, and we have a longer growing season," Jenkins said. "And real estate is so valuable now that we want to take advantage of every last square inch of it." Plus, she said, technological advancements in weather-resistant furniture and accessories mean that homeowners have plenty of options for building and decorating outdoor spaces. "It's a critical mass of all these independent things coming together to create this whole new world," she said.

"If you want a highly polished space, go inside. If you want an earthy, organic environment, go outside."

Tom Flowers - Sanctum Design Group

Creating Order in the Outdoors

For homeowners planning to add an outdoor living space to their home, the ultimate goal is identifying a purpose for the space — a welcoming alcove for guests, a service area or a dining space — and designing it accordingly. The only difference between outside versus inside rooms is that the exterior version is less polished and more tactile. As Tom Flowers, president of Alpharetta-based Sanctum Design Group, put it, "If you want a highly polished space, go inside. If you want an earthy, organic environment, go outside."

But how do you go from a yard full of overgrown weeds and tangled kudzu to an inviting area made for entertaining guests or sipping a glass of chardonnay after work? The same way you would if you were building an indoor area, Flowers said. Any design or architectural element that consumers can dream up for their home interiors can be adapted for an outdoor setting.

Take the floor, for instance. Inside, you'd use carpet, tile or hardwoods. Outside, you'd choose from gravel, wood decking, grass or other ground covers. And while exterior walls aren't quite as defined as their indoor counterparts, they can be created with flower beds, fabric paneling, bushes, stacked stone or brick. To cap it off, you need a ceiling. "Ceilings in outdoor spaces are pergolas, arbors, awnings or simply the limbs of trees," Flowers said, adding that overhead elements create the highest level of intimacy in outdoor areas.



Photo courtesy of Sanctum Design Group



Furnishing Outdoor Spaces

Once your hardscape (stone flooring, brickwork, decking, etc.) and softscape (flowers, shrubbery, grasses, etc.) are in place, the next step is decorating the space. Here again, just about anything homeowners can imagine for interior décor can be used outdoors, thanks to increasingly durable outdoor fabrics. Forget about those plastic, foldable chairs you used to schlep to the pool. Today's outdoor furnishings are designed to withstand just about anything Mother Nature throws your way, if you give them a little TLC.

Furnishings. Everything from couches and chaise lounges to Adirondack chairs and love seats is available for outdoor living spaces. Some of the more durable materials used in all-weather furniture include powder-coated aluminum or steel, chemically treated woods that repel moisture, and composite woods mixed with synthetic materials that hold up better than all-natural products in harsh conditions. Although the labels on many of these products may advertise that no maintenance is required, it's better to be safe than sorry by keeping them

Photo courtesy of Laurie Bell Fashion Accessories

covered when not in use. "Anything that's exposed is going to show weather in a year or two," Flowers said.

Fabrics. Just like your Calvin Klein slacks are made from wrinkle-resistant, stain-repellent materials, outdoor textiles have their own slate of mold- and mildew-resistant and UV-protection treatments. Jenkins, who has a degree in chemistry, said the primary technical advances in outdoor fabrics today include treatments to resist fading in sunlight, stain resistance, and special weaves that enable water to pool on top of them instead of soaking through it. Despite these advancements, don't keep them exposed to the elements for prolonged periods of time. With proper care, cushions, throw pillows and other outdoor furnishings can last three to five years, which is probably longer than the design trend will last.

While exterior fabrics have been improved to withstand the elements, they serve a more immediate purpose: "Fabrics really function to soften the landscape," Jenkins said. To make the décor fit in with the hardscape, Jenkins suggests incorporating some of the brick or stone earth tones, as opposed to brightly contrasting colors, into the fabrics. For instance, use a neutral beige or khaki shade for the back and seat cushions on a couch, and then be creative with the colors and patterns of the throw pillows or blankets.



Photo courtesy of Inside Out Living Inc. & Austin Jambor

From Glorified Grill to Full-Fledged Kitchen

If color palettes and fabric choices seem more a woman's domain, don't worry, men — there's plenty of room in an outdoor living space for you. Namely, the grill, which is the centerpiece.

There's a gray area as to what exactly constitutes a full-fledged outdoor kitchen, but in general, the fewer trips you make to your indoor one, the better your outdoor setup. Those in the outdoor accessories and landscaping industries say that by the time you have a high-end grill, sink and refrigerator outside, you have a true outdoor kitchen.

Just like their indoor cousins, outdoor kitchens can be barebones or grandiose, depending on the homeowner's desires and budget. No matter where they fall on the spectrum, backyard kitchens usually have a grilling space, eating area, counter space and cabinets. Optional features include sinks, refrigerators, a pizza oven, cocktail bar and patio heaters or misters.

"Most of our outdoor kitchens consist of a \$1,500 to \$5,000 high-quality grill, maybe a rotisserie, multiple burners, a little bar sink (not a great big kitchen sink), a refrigerator, ice maker, accessories for making mixed drinks, and a container for icing down beer," said Ken Whitlow, owner of

WaterColors in Lilburn.

The Websters have an outdoor kitchen that includes almost all of the above. The total cost? About \$65,000, according to their builder. While one might question the family's need for two kitchens, it makes more sense when you consider the amount of time they spend out there. Among their own friends, plus those of their two teenage children, the Websters give their back yard a workout — much more than before.

"We had an area that wasn't being utilized, and we wanted an outdoor living area adjacent to the pool," Webster said. Though they already had a pool, they hired a company to renovate it and build the outdoor kitchen, including exterior walls, a limestone terrace, patio heaters and lighting.

"We can use it 10 months out of the year," said Webster, who added the outdoor kitchen in 2001. Last year, he hosted the family's biggest party yet — about 75 people — for his wife's 50th birthday party.

But smaller-scale versions also provide plenty of room for entertaining. Pat and Phil Bullard, who live in Dunwoody, added one last year for about \$5,000. The couple already had a pool, a screened porch and a refrigerator outside, so they simply added a stacked-stone grilling island with granite countertops and an arbor that arches over the grilling area. Construction began near Memorial Day and was wrapped up by Labor Day.

The couple frequently has impromptu gatherings of friends and neighbors who visit to wind down after work. "There have been a lot of times where neighbors show up and we have a glass of wine, or we have our grown kids come over," said Pat Bullard, who has two sons in the Atlanta area and a daughter in North Carolina.

The Bullards also have a fire pit outside so they can take advantage of the area during cold weather. "My husband has friends over for cigars and they'll sit around the fire," said Bullard, who even takes her coffee out on the porch to wake up in the morning.

Before You Get Cookin'

Here's some food for thought if you're considering adding an outdoor kitchen to your home.

Grill. Whether it's charcoal, gas or electric, the grill is the centerpiece of any outdoor kitchen. A high-end grill generally costs more than \$1,000, but can go for as much as \$35,000. The price varies by the size of the grilling surface; whether it's custom-made or mass-produced; and the number of side burners, which are great for heating sauces or sautéing veggies.

Hood. "What people don't realize is how much more powerful a high-end grill is," said Austin Jambor, vice president of sales for Suwanee-based Inside-Out Living. "It provides the opportunity to sear a steak, but it also makes a lot of smoke." To that end, Jambor emphasized the importance of hoods. "If hoods are overlooked in an enclosed space, it can discolor the walls," he said.

Counter space and cabinets. Sure, you can buy high-end, freestanding grills that come with drawers, extra side burners and other bells and whistles. But for a truly customized, upscale look, hire a contractor to build an island, into which a grill is permanently installed. Prefabricated islands are available, but having one custom built allows you to select materials and create a design that matches your needs and style.

To withstand the elements, the frames of outdoor kitchen cabinets can be made from stainless steel, galvanized metal or other materials that won't rust in wet weather or break down when exposed to extreme high or low temperatures. For instance, Inside-Out Living constructs its cabinets from a marine-grade polymer clad in stainless steel. "The construction gives it a contemporary look with a long life," said owner John Dyer.

Whitlow, however, constructs frames for outdoor cabinets and countertops from the same type of galvanized metal used in commercial building construction. "The openings are framed in to accommodate whatever appliance or accessory the customer might want," he said.

Although some homeowners prefer all stainless-steel cabinets, many choose to cover the sides with stacked stone or brick. Another option is to use stone or brick panels, which are similar in appearance, texture and color to the real deal, but are cheaper. Critics say such materials aren't as durable though. Instead of panels, Whitlow uses composite cement sheets (the same type used as a base for tiles in houses) attached to the metal framing with galvanized screws. The structure is then covered with tile, stone, brick or stucco, which can be cleaned with degreaser and a power washer if grease drips on it.

While these materials are durable enough to withstand the elements, they require standard maintenance. "When you're grilling, you get so much grease from cooking beef," Whitlow said. "Even if you have a hood, that smoke can stain tile and grout."

Before You Start

Determining a layout for your outdoor living area requires careful consideration and planning with your contractor. For instance, the grill or fire pit should be far enough away from the house and surrounding trees to avoid fire hazards. On the other hand, if you don't have a sink or refrigerator outside, you need quick access to the indoor appliances.

Other factors to keep in mind are county and city zoning ordinances and homeowners association restrictions. And don't forget about potential electrical and plumbing issues, especially if you're adding a sink or refrigerator.

Also consider how the materials you're using will interact with other parts of your house. You want different parts of your environment to blend well, something Flowers of Sanctum Design Group calls eye transition. "You don't want to put something highly refined into something organic," Flowers said. To avoid doing so, keep in mind that the farther the outdoor room is from your home, the more it should blend in with Mother Nature.

The final step: Enjoy your outdoor room. Have brunch on your deck, invite friends over for mint juleps, or play poker and smoke cigars around the fire pit. And go ahead — use your outside voices.

For More Information

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