

Dining in outer spaces

by Tamara Browning

Outdoor living, a new and rapidly growing lifestyle phenomenon, means more than a few folding chairs, a picnic table and a hibachi, according to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association. It means bringing all the comforts of indoor living to the outdoors into what's being called the "outdoor room."

OUTER SPACES - Dr. Mike and Jane Bradley of Springfield, Ill., have a wood-burning Italian pizza oven on their deck, which faces the golf course at Panther Creek. CNS Photo by Shannon Kirshner.
BEYOND GRILLING - The Bradleys have set up a cozy sitting area on their porch. More home designers and decorators are bringing the kitchen and living room outside. CNS Photo by Shannon Kirshner. For every indoor product, there's likely an outdoor product to go with it, said Deidra Darsa, public relations and media relations manager with the association.

"Full kitchens are very popular, and those kitchens have the same appliances as indoor kitchens: sinks, dishwashers, refrigerators and warming drawers," Darsa said. "Outdoor furniture is now complete with thick cushions and entertainment centers including televisions - all weatherproof.

"Hearth products (wood-burning or gas) continue to extend the outdoor season and can be built-in, a fire pit (both built-in and portable) or a chiminea. And, like indoors, the outdoor hearth tends to be the focus of the outdoor room."

The mainstays of an outdoor room, according to the association, are an appliance for cooking, a dining table and chairs, and a hearth product to extend the season.

"It's not really outdoors anymore. It's just an extension of the house," said Chad Kruger, who is in sales at Marx Fireplaces & Lighting.

Cooking beyond the simple grill, Marx Fireplaces & Lighting has bar islands with grills. Some even have built-in radios and refrigerators. One model, the St. Martin Island, offers pub seating for up to six people, a four-speaker sound system, built-in MP3 player radio, grill, refrigerator, gas side burner and recessed lighting in two models, each for more than \$6,000.

Dr. Mike and Jane Bradley of Springfield, Ill., have an outdoor kitchen that includes an oversized Viking Grill, preparation sink, refrigerator and counterspace. However, the focal point is a wood-burning Italian pizza oven. The oven was her husband's project, Jane said.

"He loves to cook. He really got into making homemade pizza. We had been to various restaurants," she said. "LaSorella had the wood-burning pizza oven, and he thought that that was just such an awesome thing and that it made such a great crust."

The Bradleys also cook meat in the pizza oven, which then acts like a smoker. People are intrigued by it, Jane said.

"The whole outdoor kitchen thing I guess is a little unique," she said.

In addition to outdoor kitchens, beyond the folding chair, people are putting weather-friendly sofas, love seats and lounge chairs outdoors, Kruger said. Some people buy outdoor furniture in stages, starting with a dining set. Others will buy everything at the same time so it all "matches perfectly," Kruger said. It might be best to not buy outdoor furniture gradually, Kruger said, because trends in fabrics and finishes change so fast that when a consumer returns to buy something later, it may not be available.

"It's a fashion industry," he said. People can spend up to \$10,000 to \$15,000 just on a dining set, he added. "You can spend a lot of money, but most people don't."

Today, people can start using their patios in March and continue through September, thanks to an outdoor hearth.

"You can extend the amount of time you can go out by getting a gas fire pit or a patio heater," Kruger said. "A lot of people are doing that. (And) a lot of people are buying wood fire pits."

While outdoor fireplaces offer a glow as well as heat, there are other ways to light up your patio area. Choices vary widely. There are lights made to hang over tables, strings of lights with decorative bulb covers, outdoor lamps and sconces.

"Instead of just having outdoor lights, you can get wall sconces where it looks like you're inside, but you're not," said Kruger, who added that landscape lighting also could be used to accent around a deck or patio. "On nights when the air is warm and still, outdoor ceiling fans and free-standing ceiling fans can add comfort. If you don't have a ceiling, you can have one in the middle of the patio."

"It's a pedestal mount," Kruger said, explaining the free-standing style.

With all the outdoor cooking, seating and heating elements to choose from, how elaborate does a person want to make an outdoor room?

It depends on lifestyle and a homeowner's priorities, Weaver said.

"If you go ... camping and if sitting around the fireplace is a high priority to you," she said, "doing a fire pit

or something like that could be a really fun thing. Now, if your family, on the other hand, would prefer to sit in front of a computer screen or sit in front of the TV, don't bother to build a fire pit at the end of the property."

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How to plan and execute styles for outdoor living

Steps to creating the perfect outdoor room from the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association:

- Determine the ideal use of the outdoor space.

- Note how it will be used, from entertaining to relaxing.

- Create a wish list.

- Clip or print pictures from publications and put them in a notebook.

- Review the home's style. The outdoor spaces should accentuate the home's indoor spaces.

- Visit a specialty retailer. Take the notes and wish list to a specialty retailer that sells hearth, barbecue and patio products. A specialty retailer can help determine the materials and outdoor room products available in an area and guide the final plan and coordinate installation.

- Research products. Consider locations for fire and food. Position the fireplace as the focal point, blend in the cooking and eating areas and then consider additional features.

- Think foundation. Stone patios, retaining walls, fences and decks are basic foundation elements.

- Draw a plan. Build the space. Consider multiple conversation areas for enhanced functionality and interest.

- Use landscaping as an accessory. Carefully placed trees and shrubs can add important texture and appeal to an outdoor room. Select plants that change with the season, offering different colors, blooms or scents depending on the time of year.

- Add the furnishings. Consider lighting and decorative details.

Outdoor rooms often are created over a period of years to accommodate large wish lists on limited budgets. During the first year, install the hearth product and define the grilling and eating areas, then accessorize the next year. Finish the project with the installation of landscaping.

In addition, people should consider that materials made for indoor use can't hold up outside in extreme temperatures, said Darlene Weaver, president and owner of Distinctive Designs for Kitchens and Baths. However, there are materials that are geared for outdoor living.

"Cabinets can be made out of marine material that can withstand the cold, heat, freeze and thaw. Ceramic tiles, which have been fired, are another good choice for outdoor durability. Crushed quartz used in countertops is a solid, nonpermeable material."

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