

From ho-hum to wow: 4 hot backyard trends

Forget a simple patch of grass. Today's yards sport gourmet outdoor kitchens, waterproof TVs -- even air conditioning.

By Christopher Solomon



The lawn is an American institution. And like most institutions, it's pretty darned dull.

Many homeowners are starting to change this. How? By bringing the indoors to the outdoors.

Fireplaces, kitchens (with brick pizza ovens), dramatic al fresco "living rooms" that go way beyond yesteryear's uncomfortable patio furniture -- the transformation of the American yard is a long-simmering trend that's really taken off in the last two years, says Michelle Snyder of the American Society of Interior Designers. "It's kind of about creating a unified space between inside and outside -- so that you can't tell so much where the one space ends and the other begins."

Last year, 48% of 600 residential architecture firms surveyed reported that upscale landscaping is on the increase, as is the popularity of outdoor living space such as decks, porches, patios and small courtyards instead of the traditional large backyards, according to the American Institute of Architects' first Home Design Trends Survey.

Experts give many reasons, but the upshot is the same: "When you extend your living space outside, suddenly you have so much more space for living in general," says Michelle Kodis, author of "[Ultimate Backyard](#)." And comfort isn't the only benefit, Kodis writes. "If you want to raise the value of your home, start thinking about ways to add structural interest and comfort to your backyard, patio, deck, side yard -- you name it."

Want to make your yard more than just a place you visit with weed killer? We've got the ideas -- and tips -- to make it happen:

The living room breaks out

Outdoor living has long been a year-round way of life in warm climes like the South and Southern California, but it's no longer limited to those places, say people in the industry. And in the South and elsewhere, "We are seeing the spaces move from being utilitarian or even simpler spaces into becoming more and more elaborate as they become more like the indoors," says H. Don Bowden, an architect, former national president of American Society of Interior Designers and principal of Bowden Architecture in Mobile, Ala. Think ottomans, televisions -- all sorts of creature comforts normally found in your living room.

[SunBrite TV](#) and [Mirage Outdoor Concepts](#) both sell flat-panel LCD televisions designed specifically for the outdoors. The MirageVision 32-inch high-definition TV, for example, is much brighter than a normal TV for outdoor viewing and it has a wireless connection to talk to your indoor cable box or DVD player. Both SunBrite and Mirage televisions have all-weather construction that allows them to withstand rain, dirt and extreme temperature ranges.

One reason these patios and living spaces are more appealing is that the accessories today are better. "We're using a lot more upholstered furniture outdoors," Bowden says, as more companies like [F. Schumacher](#) and [Scalamandre](#) have developed more interesting fabrics that can stand up to outdoor use. "They have more of the feel of a cotton yet they're weatherproof, for the most part," he says. "You wouldn't believe the colors and patterns -- now I can get paisleys and polka dots."

Outdoor fireplaces also are increasingly popular as centerpieces. Even in the South, they can extend the outdoor season by taking the chill out of a late-autumn evening.

Tips

- **Think about air movement.** Especially in really warm, humid climates, you need to think about keeping air circulating. "In a living-type area, you should have at least five ceiling fans if you can," recommends Barbara Schlattman, FASID, of Houston-based Barbara Schlattman Interiors. Some people even have installed a few of their home's air-conditioning vents outdoors to keep cool, she says.
- **Think flexibility.** An outdoor space should be adaptable, says Bowden. "You want to be able to follow the sun, or avoid the sun." It's also good if a space and its furniture can accommodate different numbers of people; Bowden recommends stools or benches that tuck away when not in use, or floor cushions that can be put in a cabinet.

Great outdoors gastronomy

"For us, people don't build homes without summer kitchens anymore," says Houston-based designer Schlattman. "It's expected. It's not a fad." And we're not talking some crusty old Weber grill out by the birdbath. Clients are regularly interested in having built-in barbecue grills, refrigerators, even icemakers. "I know people who have done pizza ovens outdoors," she says.

Often, the appliances are hidden behind cabinetry "so it's still a very spacious, very pleasing look to the eye, but very functional," Schlattman says. One of her clients not only hid their appliances beneath countertops, but they also had an artist paint the wall to look like mosaic, while the ceiling was painted to look like the top of a tent.

And what's food without drinks? A bar "so you can entertain" is pretty standard -- at least in the South, says Bowden.

Tips

- **Double duty.** Sometimes, a fireplace can do two jobs. In "Ultimate Backyard," Kodis features the revamped yard of a 1,200-square-foot rowhouse in Washington, D.C., in which the homeowner's smaller brick-and-mortar fireplace functions as both a warmer and a cooker.
- **Buy to last.** Stainless-steel appliances will better brave the elements.

Waterworks

Water features such as fountains and miniature reflecting pools are increasingly popular. So, too, are baths and showers. Sure, the outdoor shower is nothing new at seaside cabins, but bathing al fresco is now happening a long way from sand and saltwater -- and going upscale. "Pretty much anything you would have indoors in a spa in a residence is being created outdoors," says Bowden. Take the Sedona home owned by architect Aldo Andreoli, featured in Kodis' book "Ultimate Backyard." The outdoor shower across the lawn from the pool, clad in blue mosaic tile to match, is nearly as much sculptural as functional.

Tip

Work with what you've got. A shower needn't be expensive, or showy. In another example in Kodis' book, a landscape designer told a client on a budget in Oakland that there wasn't room for a hot tub in his tight side yard. Instead, the designer enclosed the yard with reclaimed eight-foot redwood fencing and tucked a wooden shower stall into one corner of the space -- a sudsy little haven just feet away from a busy four-lane street.

Breaking up the yard

Bringing the indoors outdoors isn't only about cushions and fireplaces, though -- it also means adopting the same principles that make the interior of a home comfortable. "Designing your landscape is not so different from designing your house," Julie Moir Messervy, a nationally-known landscape designer, writes in "[Outside the Not So Big House](#)," which she co-authored with Sarah Susanka.

Those principles include creating cozy, human-sized places in the yard that flow together. "If something flows, it feels good," Messervy says.

The yard should not feel completely chopped up into little claustrophobic bits. As in a house, there should be both a sense of intimacy and space.

To create that intimacy outdoors, Messervy is a big fan of establishing "rooms" outdoors - - whether it's a pergola or a trellis or a teahouse or a porch. "The components of an outdoor room are the same as for one that's indoors: some walls, a floor and a ceiling," she writes.

Tips

- **Good fences make good living.** Start by establishing the boundary of your outdoor room with hedges, walls or screens. "It doesn't have to be a monolithic thing," Messervy says. "You gain privacy, you gain the ability to entertain back there without your neighbors watching." And you've suddenly created corners that can be the start of some great nooks.
- **Invade space.** Be willing to invade open spaces in a yard, say experts. One Aspen, Colo. ranch house featured in Messervy's book has a panorama of the mountains that's easy to feel overwhelmed by. But a low hedge and a few aspen trees at the edge of the home's terrace where the residents sit lend a feeling of shelter and intimacy to what could otherwise feel like an exposed space.