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Taking the Indoors Out

By Cynthia Howe

WHO HASN'T WALKED DOWN their neighborhood street and smelled the alluring aroma of someone barbequing? The smell conjures visions of a family or close friends gathered to cook, eat, relax, share and play. Well, as most things in Texas often do, outdoor living in the great state has gone big – real big!

Outdoor living, and all that it entails, has become a growing industry as the trend toward extending a home's living space has become more popular. While our desire for cooking and playing in the great outdoors has always been one of Americans' favorite past times, we are no longer relegated to the Weber Days of

yesterday.

Similar to a standard home's configuration, certain areas in an outdoor living plan begin the framework to arrange your backyard. Whether you have a patio-size yard, or acres to play with, there are five main elements to any well-planned yard: cooking, eating, relaxing, playing and "spice." Your budget will dictate how far your dream yard can take you.

COOKING IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

The centerpiece of any home is thought to be the kitchen. Taking it outside doesn't alter that centerpiece at all. While the

possibilities for your outdoor cooking area are extensive, there are three main elements: the grill, preparation area and storage.

The focal point of any outdoor kitchen area is the grill. You can spend anywhere from \$10 (for a beach hibachi) to \$6,000 plus on the grill alone. The pros and cons of choosing gas or charcoal are numerous. While gas grills are more expensive, charcoal can increase the expense of outdoor cooking over the long run. While charcoal may add a preferred taste to the meat, gas provides more even heat and a more consistent outcome.

Other aspects to consider are durability and accessories. The heavier gauged metal grills are much more durable, albeit more costly. The more creative cooks will be attracted to the possibilities the higher end grills provide. There are rotisseries for roasting large pieces of meat and smoking accessories for cooking the infamous Texas brisket. Another option to consider is the drop-in gas grill that provides a more finished look to the overall cooking area, but doesn't alter the actual cooking experience.

Your preparation area can be as simple or extensive as your budget allows. At Barbeques Galore you can find beautiful pre-fabricated preparation centers that won't cost an arm and a leg. These preparation centers have granite-like counters that surround the grill of your choice with ample workspace and a bit of storage. The higher-end models also provide the option to add sinks, warming trays, drop-in coolers, refrigerators and the infamous "kegorator." The advantage to the pre-fabricated centers is their mobility. You can re-arrange your yard from time to time, or pack it in the U-Haul when you move.

The more elaborate preparation areas are permanent structures built with concrete blocks, brick and mortar on a concrete base. Again, the plan can be as simple as a conservative space around



the grill, to an expansive cooking area that closely represents an indoor kitchen space. A built-in sink is probably the highest priority for many grill masters, but other options include a refrigerator, warmers, cupboards for dishes and glasses, even a built in bar area for adult entertaining.

EATING

There is nothing better than sitting down at a table surrounded by family and friends – the ideal Norman Rockwell moment. Dining outside only enhances the experience, as laughter spills out over the meal. Outdoor dining tables have changed over the years, becoming more like their indoor counterparts. When choosing an outdoor set, keep in mind the size of your family, the comfort level and necessary durability as well as your budget. IKEA has some fabulous options for the budget-minded planner, while stores such as Casual Living have a plethora of elaborate and fantastic designs to choose from.

A large concern in our sunny state is the inevitability of heat in the summer months. When planning your dining area, remember to plan for shelter as well as seating. A qualified contractor can build a custom arbor, while a conservative budget may require something as simple as a UV protecting umbrella. A median budget may take you to Target or Casual Living for structures that set up easily, but can be stored away for winter months. Beautiful

wrought iron pavilions add character as well as shelter.

RELAXING

Along with bringing the kitchen and dining room outside, living rooms are making a break for it too. While some may choose a conservative chaise lounge or double swing seat, still others may expand their budget to include outdoor couches, chairs and coffee tables. Casual Living offers a complete selection of outdoor living furniture with fabrics manufactured to resist the elements and yet retain a comfortable feel on your skin.

Outdoor fireplaces or fire pits, prayer gardens, water falls and ponds can all be utilized in setting the relaxing atmosphere that is ideal for outdoor living spaces. Cuddling up by the fire is no longer limited to the family room sofa. Whether you choose an economic fire pit, or build a classic outdoor fireplace adjacent to your sitting area, a fire provides a social centerpiece for gatherings and entertaining. Barbeques Galore has a large variety of fire pits and fireplace inserts. For those desiring a more elaborate outdoor fireplace, the folks at Overhead Door Company can help create a custom fireplace.

Many yards today include a prayer garden, which may include everything from a simple reminder of a loved one to an extensive garden with crosses, St. Assisi, or stepping-stones with words that serve

as spiritual reminders.

Another soothing element to a well thought out yard is a water feature. The sound of water has had a soothing affect on the spirit for thousands of years and makes a lovely addition to the ambience of any outdoor living space. Budgets for waterfalls range widely depending on size and features.

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PLAYING

Many of our fondest memories center on outdoor games, whether it was Marco Polo, croquet, Bocce Ball or a simple game of tag, it mingled with the smells of charcoal and the sounds of cicada's ringing in the air.

No well-planned yard should be without a play area and it doesn't take a huge budget to achieve some outdoor fun. A conservative size lawn can accommodate



photos by Jennifer Thomas

croquet, while a beautiful pool can provide hours of fun for all ages.

SPICE

While most cooks leave the spice on the hamburger, the well-planned outdoor living area has some spice of its own. Lighting, bug misters, fans and outdoor air conditioners are some of the items to “sprinkle in” your overall design. With the heat of Texas outdoor air conditioners, also known as “evaporative coolers,” are growing in demand and popularity. While water misters also help keep the heat down, a wonderful addition is a bug mister that keeps the mosquitoes down as well.

Talk to at least three companies before making your final choice. Way Ray Contracting in Frisco is a wonderful place to start and reviewing their previous work can really help in creating a vision for your yard. B&R Remodeling, Majestic Gardens, as well as Lone Star Backyard are other companies that ignite your passion and creativity.

Your life is what you make of it, as are the treasures you hold dear in the form of memories. Your backyard is one of the back drops to building that treasure. With today’s products, designs and possibilities, your yard can become an oasis that feeds and soothes the soul for years to come.

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