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Creative ways to build a backyard oasis of any size.

For some, extra time at home has been a welcome perk; for others, it's proved a challenging change from a jet-setting norm. But no matter which category you fall into, one unifying positive is that now is the perfect time to unearth your property's true potential. Whether you're embarking on DIY updates or hiring a professional designer, here are some ideas to jumpstart your outdoor living imagination.

BY JENNIFER SPERRY



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COOKING & GATHERING

What once was mostly a grill set into a stone wall has grown greatly in sophistication. Today, homeowners are replicating their indoor kitchen's style and functionality—sinks, cabinets, and appliances—outside.

A successful outdoor kitchen requires thoughtful space planning. One important consideration is proximity to the house. As a general rule of thumb, if an outdoor kitchen is placed near your primary kitchen, it will get used more frequently. If it's farther away, it needs more functionality, like storage and refrigeration, to save constant trips back into the house.

In recent years, outdoor cabinet options have really improved in both looks and longevity. Many fully weatherproof options mimic the look of traditional wood. Refrigerator and warming drawers, ice makers, and beverage fridges enhance your entertaining capacity, and fully functional sinks and dishwashers handle cleanup with ease.

A built-in gas grill is the anchor of any successful outdoor kitchen. If you cook multicourse meals frequently, opt for additional burners so you can boil corn or lobsters while grilling meats and veggies. Remember, if the grill is placed near gathering spaces, it needs to be vented—no one wants smoke blowing onto their guests.









COMFORT

“Creating a comfortable environment is the best way to ensure the use of an outdoor living area,” said landscape architect Dan Gordon, principal of Dan Gordon Landscape Architect. “This means providing areas of sun and shade as well as places that are warm and dry, especially in colder weather.”

Natural or manmade elements can provide dappled shade for cooling. Consider a pergola or tension awning to make a high-sun deck, patio or pool area more comfortable. For a custom-designed awning, a workshop like Sperry Fabric Architecture specializes in installs that cast just the right amount of shade with optimum aesthetics. High-end umbrellas are now outfitted with LED lights and can even adjust automatically to follow the sun.

To provide warmth and visual interest during the off-season, Gordon recommends incorporating a hearth into your design. An outdoor fireplace, often placed on the wall of a covered porch or cabana, is also stunning on its own as a freestanding focal point surrounded by teak furniture. For a more affordable heat source, opt for a fire pit fed by natural gas, which can be easily started with the push of a button.



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GARDEN ROOMS

“With our contemporary lifestyles, we expect more of our outdoor living spaces,” noted Gordon. A “garden room”—whether it’s a window-lined art studio, a “she” shed or any other whimsical folly—is the perfect way to connect with nature. “It doesn’t have to be large, as long as it’s humanistic in design and provides a connection to nature,” he explained.

SEATING

“A garden can be a place of escape, potentially more now than ever before,” said Ryan Moody, principal of D.C.-based landscape architecture firm Moody Graham. “Sitting outside in a garden with a view is an act of self-care that provides contemplation, rest,



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and recovery.” In light of these benefits, Moody’s firm recommends providing at least one opportunity for sitting in every garden, even if it’s a simple stone bench.

The seating should have protection, whether from tree canopies or architectural overhangs, and preferably be oriented toward an open view. Another pro tip is to opt for movable furniture, which allows for more flexibility as weather conditions and seasons change.

WATERPOWER

Humans have a strong preference for and fascination with water in all shapes and forms, which is why incorporating a water feature into a garden has such powerful potential, believes the design team at Moody Graham. Custom-designed water features (consider one powered by rainwater) serve to animate a garden with sound and motion. If a large installation isn’t possible, consider a small fountain or rill.

SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS

“Every landscape has to take into account sustainability,” asserted Gordon. “By definition, landscapes are living, growing, changing things. We all have come to realize that the earth is an ecosystem of which we are a part.”

More and more homeowners are seeking landscapes that fit closely with the natural environment and require less maintenance, observed the architect. “Selection of drought-tolerant plants, rainwater harvesting, drip irrigation, and composting are just a few ways to create landscapes that are in greater harmony with nature.”

**dangordon.com, moodygraham.com,
sperryfabricarchitecture.com**



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