

The
Romance
of an Outdoor Fireplace

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Alluring, even magical, outdoor fireplaces draw people like moths. Their primal appeal has never been stronger as more and more families rediscover the delights

of dining, hosting and enjoying their evenings outdoors.

This 12 ft. high, 8 ft. wide and 4 ft. deep Washington, Connecticut outdoor fireplace is a showstopping sight. Built with stucco over concrete block and a locally quarried granite mantle in the Rumford style by Hoffman Landscapes, who oversaw the entire renovation project. It's a rectangular monolith towering over the property's back sloping lawn like something out of Stonehenge.

The Challenge

The original backyard property was little more than a nondescript slope of lawn abutting the woods behind the house. Hoffman's challenge was to fulfill the owner's request for a backyard focal point – something to look at besides the woods. They chose to add an outdoor fireplace and upgrade its surrounding area as well as build an Ipe (Brazilian hardwood) deck with hidden fasteners to create a dining terrace and continue the modern theme.

Overcoming P&Z

There were a plethora of P&Z issues to contend with, not the least of which were the wetlands that surround the property. This room was crafted in the area of uplands that is wedged between two adjacent wetlands. The fireplace and retaining wall were designed with an extensive drainage system behind them. The drainage system intercepted subsurface ground water and re-routed it through pipes into a detention basin that was installed under the driveway. The main lawn panel between the dining room and living room also has drainage included beneath it. Other issues to face included the regulations regarding native plantings (the hills of native ferns could not be ripped out!) Hoffman was required to preserve all the native ferns even though they interfered with the placement of the new fireplace and platform. To overcome this directive from P&Z, Hoffman transferred the foliage to an area behind the fireplace where it still remains in its native habitat.

Build It and They Will Come

Low stone walls on either side of the fireplace as well as the retaining walls in front of the bluestone patio platform are made of Connecticut fieldstone with bluestone cap. Beyond the walls, on either side of the patio with its polymeric sand joints, a series of three turf steps, made from recycled city curbs, lead gently down to the lawn below. The long

seating stones on top of the patio walls, as well as the stone patio itself, mirror the teak back patio of the colonial home.

The owners were not keen on introducing a lot of pots and plantings so Hoffman added just a single English boxwood at each of the patio's four corners to complete the setting. They also introduced four native River Birch trees to stand sentinel behind the fireplace and the replanted ferns. All enhance the ecology of the wetland.

This rustic, spacious patio with its soaring fireplace and surrounding lawn is now ready for people to congregate for drinks or casual dining. Subtle landscaping lights help counterbalance the monochromatic coloring of all the mandatory native plantings and are critical to the truly astonishing transformation that takes place when the sun sets. The River Birch play a starring role in this evening light show.

The Fireplace

A Rumford fireplace is very tall and very shallow. At the core of the structure is a product called Isokern... Utilizing Icelandic volcanic stone mined from the Hekla volcano, Isokern has achieved vast insulating values in the production of modular component fireplaces, ovens and chimneys for indoor, outdoor, residential and commercial use.

Wood must be placed inside vertically instead of horizontally. When first invented in 1796, these fireplaces represented a revolution in fireplace design due to their ability to burn wood more efficiently. This was in part thanks to the restriction in their chimney openings, which helps increase the up draft & allows heat and light to radiate outwards. Today, Rumford fireplaces are enjoying a comeback.



Evening Splendor

Stark and spare during daylight, in the gathering dusk this outdoor fireplace/patio setting takes on an otherworldly blue hue. Thanks to a combination of subtly placed landscape lighting at the base of the River Birch and fireplace, as well as the fire's own roaring flames.

As the evening darkens colors change from dazzling blue to vibrant orange, gold and red. All the lighting works to create one towering shadow that stretches up from the stone mantel to the top of the chimney like some enormous dark hood. Reds, oranges, yellows glow on seating, logs, stone and trees making this a magical setting, drawing people in to some universal ritual of celebration and companionship.