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Backyard Vacations

families transform space into resort-worthy getaways



by alice kenny

Julie Marcus sips tea in her new "mom cave," an outdoor room nestled in the hillside and bordered with fieldstone, hostas and fern beds. Her hidden get-away is just a small detail in what at first glance looks like an outdoor resort complete with movie theater, pool, kitchen and living areas. Actually, this is the family's "outdoor home" artfully landscaped into the backyard of their one-acre plot on a busy New Canaan road.

Meanwhile, Mathew Berger grills rib-eye steaks on his outdoor Viking grill. It's built into his bluestone patio complete with sunken hot tub, adjacent stainless steel beverage cooler, outdoor living room and patio heaters. The feel is of a country retreat. But the reality is that this outdoor oasis is in the backyard of his family's quarter-acre Fairfield property.

Whether wedged into the back of a quarter acre or spread out on more, the trend toward turning backyards into outdoor fantasies is growing throughout Southwestern Connecticut. Neglected backyards once dominated by badminton nets and crab grass are transformed into real estate assets and five-star vacations.

"Instead of going to the Caribbean you can have your Caribbean palace in your own backyard," says Clement Butt of Weston, owner of Classic Garden Design and architect of the Berger's backyard fantasy.

Depending on your imagination — and your checkbook — these outdoor fantasies can come complete with kitchens, living rooms and family rooms, with fountains, pools and spas,





The Marcus family, with the help of Hoffman Landscapes, has turned their acre in New Canaan into a true outdoor vacation spot, complete with children's play area (who wouldn't head straight for that tepee?), above, an outdoor living room and kitchen, below, and a serene "mom cave" for both relaxing and watching the kids.



and with cocktail bars, waterfalls and play areas.

Costs can run anywhere from \$20,000 to \$700,000, says Brian Cossari, the landscape architect with Hoffman Landscapes in Wilton who designed the Marcus outdoor paradise. But the money, he adds, is well spent. Experts estimate you should invest 30 percent of your housing costs into your yard. These outdoor homes, studies show, maintain 81 percent of their value.

Curiously, the turbulent economy paired with fear of travel since the 2001 terrorist attacks are pushing the trend, Cossari says. For the Marcus and Berger families, demanding careers and growing families make time too precious to waste on 6-hour flights and vacation planning. Others, meanwhile, say they have no room left in budgets for posh resorts and exotic vacations. They want to pump their money into year-round vacations that last — and are, literally, right in their backyard.

"When we go away, it's hard work," Marcus says. "This," she adds with some understatement, "is an easy place to be."

Before the renovation, however, the only good thing she had to say about her former steeply sloped backyard was that it was good for sledding.

But now, nearly eight years later, it seems there is not much that their 5,000-square-foot center-hall colonial has that their adjoining outdoor home can't match. Three levels of what Cossari calls "manipulated topography" (tons of soil and rock heaved into place) now house a prep kitchen with a stainless steel counter. A pergola made from old barn beams and covered in wisteria shades a grilling area and an outdoor living room. Hydrangea, black-eyed Susans, sedum and ferns blossom throughout their outdoor palace, and evergreen trees and shrubs layered along the property line offer privacy and intimacy.

Of course, as the busy mother of four, Marcus says her favorite outdoor addition is her secluded "mom cave," where she catches her breath before returning to her husband, Bo, and their four children, ages 10, 12, 14 and 16. A close second, says the rest of the family, is their outdoor movie theater. Friends and neighbors join for impromptu movie nights when they turn on their DVD projector and pull down the movie screen hanging from the pergola. A 4-by-4 Rumford fieldstone fireplace helps add an extra month to each end of the summer season, allowing extra time during movie intermissions to splash and relax in their oversize 20-by-45 pool and adjoining spa.

Berger, in fact, says he, his wife, Kimberly, their 5-year-old son, Noah, and their 10-month old twins, Danica and Jonas, use their outdoor home year-round. The outdoor kitchen, he says, gets more use than the indoor one, grilling everything from steak to corn and asparagus on their outdoor stove. Noah keeps them company, jumping into the hot tub even as the snow is falling.

Two gas fire pits warm them and subtle counter lighting turns their outdoor retreat into the perfect spot for entertaining.

"Work is stressful enough," he says. "Here I can be in a resort in my own backyard." @



Create your own backyard resort

Forget wooden swings and pressure treated decks. Redefine your yard into a five-star destination vacation spot complete with built-in views, sounds and scents to fit your budget.

Focus on sight, sound and scent

SIGHT: Build fountains for water views (and the bonus of soothing sounds)

SOUND: Pipe music in on hidden speakers

SCENT: Build fireplaces and plant fragrant flowers and shrubs

Use lighting to kick up your backyard scene

- Use spotlights to show off fountains, shrubs and plantings

- Add "uplighting" to show off fountains, fireplaces and tree canopies

- Add "moonlighting" (or down lighting) hung high in trees to produce shadows

- Place lights under countertops to accent stone walls supporting them

- Hang "pin-hole" lights for mysterious filters

