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FAMILY ROOM WITH A VIEW

Create a backyard living area that provides peace and pleasure

BY DEBBIE SWANSON

From enjoying pizza baked in an outdoor oven to watching a movie projected under the stars, the definition of time spent in the backyard is changing for today's family.

According to a 2015 survey by Houzz, an online home design and advice community, 43 percent of homeowners who have completed, are working on or planning an outdoor project identify family time as a top priority.

And thanks to modern advances in outdoor materials, products and appliances, it's easy to transform your space into a family retreat that will make it seem as if you're miles away from today's hurried lifestyle.



PLAN AHEAD

Spacious or compact, hugging the exterior walls or tucked at the end of a pathway, a comfortable sitting area such as a patio or deck will be your backyard's home base.

Begin with good planning, advises Carl N. Berg of Berg Landscape Architects in Midway, Utah. Think about "family size and ages, views to

enhance or to block, desired enhancements, how the space will connect to the home and a project budget," he recommends.

Consider how your family will use the space. And remember to think long term; young children who barely sit still today will eventually become teenagers longing for lounge chairs and a place

to entertain friends.

"Draw your thoughts out on paper, and consider changes with the seasons, which could impact the scope of the project," suggests Matt Culligan, president of Rolling Landscapes in Lemont, Ill. For example, a spot that looks perfect in winter may lose its appeal if it offers too much, or too little, protection from the hot summer sun.

"(Include) spaces for plantings to help soften the look," adds Culligan.

Keep the end result in proportion to your home and lot; an expansive patio will crowd out a small lot or may feel overwhelming outside a modestly sized home.



FACTOR IN CREATURE COMFORTS

If your available seating area is limited, don't despair. Maintain an open feel with fewer seats and smaller tables. Then consider where you can place supplemental seating such as a cushioned bench, a porch-style swing or even foldaway loungers.

Locate seats where you know you'll be spending lots of your time. "For example, if a family has a toddler with a climbing

structure, complement that space with seating and shade for the parents," says Berg. Shade is another critical factor when it comes to comfort. A pergola or gazebo will provide reliable relief from the sun's rays, while shade from an oversized umbrella or vine-covered lattice wall will move through the day.

Just because you're outdoors doesn't mean you have to forgo climate



Bridgewater dining chair with fade-resistant cushion, \$369, crateandbarrel.com

control. "For cooling, add fans inside a pergola ... also useful for keeping mosquitoes away," says Matthew Biron, a landscape architect at Hoffman Landscapes in Wilton, Conn.

GO BRIGHT

Use lights to define your perimeter, illuminate walkways and stairs or gently mark changes in elevation. Embedded in gardens or shrubbery, lighting can add a mystical glow to the entire yard.

"You can install solar lights, available at most stores, yourself," says Biron.

Other quick solutions include bamboo torches, citronella candles and hanging or tabletop lanterns. Change up the illumination to set the mood — strings of lights for a festive flair, torches for a tropical feel or enclosed candles for a quiet dinner.

For a more permanent, integrated approach, Biron suggests installing LED lighting. "Controlled by your iPhone, you can turn the lights on and off from virtually anywhere," he says. For little-used corners, try mounting a motion-detecting light fixture. >>



Keep Cool

Use portable cooling units or fans to ease the heat on hot days.



FOCUS ON THE FLOW

Once your new retreat is designed, don't let a rusted railing or wobbly steps lead you to it. Take a fresh look at how you'll be transitioning from your home to your yard.

"A stoop or steps from the house to the backyard can upgrade the whole look, especially for an older house," says Culligan.

Landscape designers also recommend tying everything together using walkways — paths of gravel or pavers can improve safety and minimize mud. Add a timeless element by integrating kid-crafted stepping stones amid the pavers.



ADD FIRE AND WATER

A fire pit or fireplace draws all ages, whether for a family marshmallow roast, a supervised gathering for teens or a cozy evening for adults to unwind.

Freestanding fire pits can be relatively inexpensive, or you can incorporate a fire feature into the design of your deck, patio or even your outdoor table.

For busy families, Culligan recommends gas-powered versions: "You can get a fire going very quickly, and enjoy the time available."

Another compelling outdoor feature is anything that involves water, from the soft trickle of a waterfall to the mesmerizing beauty of a koi pond.

Create a focal point with a water sculpture or install plumbing for a garden fountain. If you have pets, a paw-operated drinking fountain will keep Fido or Fluffy happy.



JAZZ IT UP

Provided you opt for weatherproof materials, have fun and decorate! Use the home's exterior walls to hang art or space-creating mirrors, and incorporate colorful planters, pillows and tablecloths that will make the space even more inviting.

Sound systems are increasingly popular, Biron notes. "You can add integrated speakers into your landscape, controlled by an app on your smartphone."

Don't stop at music; purchase a projector, then add an outdoor screen — or tack a white sheet along



a wall or fence — and host movie nights your family will talk about all winter. Just add popcorn!



MAKE IT PERSONAL

The options for creating unique family spaces are only limited by your imagination. Once the basics are in place, add the extras that suit your family's personality.

Popular accessories may include a hammock for whiling away the afternoon or a bistro table for morning coffee and evening wine.

For the younger crowd, "parents still want playsets ... but they're no longer the old-school, metal slides," says Biron, who notes that play forts are popular today.

You can also design areas that will inspire activity. Churn up a small plot for veggie growing, plant a circle of tall sunflowers where your youngster can have a secret hideaway or make space for traditional lawn games like croquet that offer a novel alternative to electronic entertainment.

And don't forget your four-legged family members. Pets will appreciate shade, easily provided with low-level plantings. For even more creature comfort, add an outdoor dog bed. ●

