

Out of This World



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Outdoor living spaces are a hot landscaping trend

In a recent survey, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) asked leading landscape architects to name the top trends for 2008. Outdoor kitchens and fire pits were ranked as popular items, but many of the landscape architects polled noted an increase in requests for outdoor “great rooms.”

“Homeowners are reconnecting with their outdoor space, often in creative and imaginative ways,” said Perry Howard, president of the ASLA. “It’s no surprise that people want to take elements that work so well inside their home and recreate them outside.”

Home Renovation Trends (www.homerenovationtrends.wordpress.com) supports those findings. “For 2008, the home has incorporated the living room, kitchen and dining room into an exterior area,” it reports. “The outdoor space that had previously included just a cooking area now encompasses a grand living space that resembles a second home without the roof, expanding the home from 3,000 square feet to over 4,000 square feet without moving a wall.”

“An outdoor living space is really an extension of your home,” explains Tony Barash of Higher Ground Landscaping (www.highergroundlandscaping.net), which works in the upscale suburbs of Detroit. “It’s a hot trend right now. Once one person sees one at their friend’s home, they want one. As word spreads, outdoor living areas will become even more common at the homes of the wealthy.”



The addition of features such as built-in grills and refrigerators can add dramatic visual appeal and usefulness to traditional outdoor patios.

Barash has designed and installed a number of outdoor living areas, and he says that each project is unique, but there are certain elements that most customers request. "There's often an outdoor kitchen area, an outdoor fireplace and a hot tub," he says. "We sometimes combine fire with a hot tub installation, putting an island in the middle of the hot tub with a natural gas flame so you have the fire and light shimmering off the water in the evening. It's all custom work, so there are a lot of possibilities when it comes to outdoor living spaces."

Customers often have a general sense of the look they're trying to achieve, but often need help with specific elements, Barash has found. "HGTV has some really good programs about outdoor living spaces—people see those and see something they like, then we try to expand on those ideas."

Design is critical in creating outdoor living spaces. Sometimes this job is handled by a landscape architect, other times the client works with the installation contractor. In the latter case, "You really have to think far ahead," says Barash. "You can't just say, 'Well, we'll put a bench over there and a fireplace somewhere over there.' Everything has to work together."

Outdoor bars that provide the homeowner a place where they can cook and entertain at the same time are also popular at the moment, says Barash. "Barbecues built into a granite counter are very nice. When you build outdoor living spaces, you're mostly working with natural products: stone, concrete, masonry items." That said, today's high-tech outdoor living areas are often complete with state-of-the-art kitchen appliances and lighting, so there is a learning curve for landscapers not accustomed to placing orders for, say, refrigerators.

There are some special skills required in typical outdoor living space installations. In addition to experience with masonry materials and hardscapes, "it helps to have a working knowledge of electrical and gas installation, as well as the code requirements for each," explains Barash, who is a licensed residential builder. Those factors might explain why relatively few landscapers tend to offer or specialize in outdoor living areas. "It's sort of a niche, because very few guys do it," he says.

The starting costs for the projects Barash has worked on have started in the \$40,000 range, with additional costs depending on the types of appliances and features the customer chooses. They've also taken at least one month to install, he says. "You have to pull permits for everything, so you're dealing with municipalities and inspectors. So, you have to have not only plans for the client, but blueprints showing where gas and electrical lines are running and so on. There's a lot of time involved."

Photo courtesy of Higher Ground Landscaping.



Today's outdoor living spaces often combine natural stone and masonry products with state-of-the-art kitchen appliances.	In many cases, installation of outdoor living areas requires expertise (and permits) in electrical, plumbing and gas connections.
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Mark Jones with Turning Leaf, Inc., (www.turningleafinc.com) says that their company has been installing outdoor living spaces for the last decade, but has seen a real jump in demand for these landscapes over the past three to four years, and not just among the wealthy. "It's really throughout the market," he says. "While they might not go for a structure, some of our more economy-focused customers are interested in a nice patio setup with a small area for fires. We can customize the project to meet the economic needs of the client."

Jones says that the main question homeowners need to consider is whether they want to begin with a true outdoor room that is weatherproof, or if they're more interested in an open, outdoor patio space. "That's the primary factor in determining the cost," he says. "Sometimes, a small outdoor living space is intended primarily for aesthetic purposes—there might be a corner of the yard that the customer wants to put in a small patio to add visual interest. In other cases, it's a full-fledged part of the home."

The size and scope of the project impacts not only the cost to the customer, but also the complexity to the landscaper, Jones explains. "A small, freestanding trellis with a patio underneath may not require a permit, but for most of the outdoor living space projects we handle—anything attached to the house or where utilities are involved—we need to get blueprints and permits for."

Once a customer determines a budget and general plan for their outdoor living space, Jones says it's important to work with them to refine that plan. "Usually, people have just a general concept of an outdoor room, and then we work to customize it to the size of their yard and to the extent of amenities that they want," says Jones. "Some clients are interested in incorporating televisions and dishwashers—others are more interested in a feature like a limestone loveseat. It all depends on the customer."

When products like televisions or other appliances are requested, Jones says he usually tries to provide leads on brands and models that will work well in the outdoor living room setting based on past experience, but usually doesn't purchase them directly. "We don't buy enough of them that we can buy them at a wholesale level. So, I would just end up buying them retail and then adding a markup. Instead, I usually try to bring the customer to an [outdoor living products] expo and we'll look at various options, or take them to a contractor supply store where I might get a discount and let them pick something out."

There are companies that specialize in manufacturing products for the growing outdoor living space market. FireFox Energy Concepts (www.firefoxenergy.com) in New Jersey carries an array of items ranging from outdoor fireplace units

to barbecue grills to awnings. The company also handles design and installation of outdoor living spaces. "We can do everything for the customer right up to making them their first martini to enjoy in their new outdoor living space," says Tony Bernard with FireFox.

Gene Bert, of Bert's Landscaping (www.bertslandscaping.com) in Greensburg, Pa., says that even in the northern Pittsburgh-area climate, outdoor living spaces are a hot item at the moment. In particular, he says, many customers are asking about adding an outdoor fireplace. "Everyone thinks that fireplaces will be used only in the winter," says Bert, "but they're used a lot in the summer. You don't use them for heat, you use them for ambiance." Bert says that lighting is a key consideration when adding outdoor fireplaces or other features, because many times those areas will be used at night, as well as during the day.



"Our aim is to provide customers with an improved outdoor living area that they can enjoy for years to come," says Corinne Mitchell of WayRay Contracting, Inc., based in Frisco, Texas. WayRay designs and builds outdoor living spaces with features ranging from fireplaces to complete kitchens.

The cost of the outdoor living spaces that Bert builds "really depends on how far the customer wants to take things," he says. "You can start with a basic patio and do some things to add interest—something like a custom grill area. Once you start getting into building custom fireplaces and that type of thing, obviously, the cost goes up."

One of Bert's tricks to keeping costs—especially long-term maintenance costs—down for customers is to build brick and masonry structures around grills and other appliances in a way that provides a custom look, but still allows these products to be easily removed if they need to be serviced or replaced. "You just have to do a little shopping to find the right grill, one with front doors below, for example," he explains. "Those will look built-in, but can be easily rolled right out of the space I've built for them."

Another low-cost technique he uses to increase interest in a traditional patio area is to create some sort of entryway, something that makes people feel that they've entered a new room or space when they pass through. "A little walkway or a gate or some shrubs increases interest and makes people want to stay in that space for a little while. I try to get my customers outside," says Bert. "I tell them, 'If I do my job right, you're going to be spending more time outside.'"

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who is always on the lookout for interesting and unusual stories.