

# The patio is the new family room

BY DAVID BRADLEY  
The Associated Press

Picture this: you settle into your most comfortable chair after a long day, and as you chat with family or friends while sipping a cool beverage, soothing tunes and the aroma of freshly cooked food fill the air.

Could this be a fancy den? Or an upscale family room with adjoining kitchen?

How about your patio? Patios are in. Forget cheesy tubular, flimsy nylon strap furniture and hibachis on a concrete slab. Today's patio serves as a de facto outdoor family room-entertainment center where homeowners under time constraints and stress from work can unwind amid tiered decks, fountains, music and mood lighting, furniture and fully equipped kitchens.

"Everyone is talking about these new outdoor rooms," said Marybeth Cornwell, vice president for Lowes Home Improvement Warehouse. "That's how hot patio living is. Consumers tell us they want a place

where they can turn off the cell phones and pagers and relax. And they want the same comforts found inside their home."

Patios continue a cocooning trend among homeowners who view \$500 solid aluminum cast furniture sets as a good alternative to \$3,000 vacations.

Today's patio is no longer a "hodgepodge of items thrown together," said Cornwell. The same coordinated design approach applied to interiors has simply moved outside.

It starts with furniture, including a new line by Coleman. Solid cast aluminum tables and chairs are the norm but are joined by sofas, oversized chairs and ottomans in conversational arrangements. There's UV-resistant fabrics on fluffy cushions and coordinated side elements including torches and occasional tables.

Seven-to-10-year furniture warranties are common in furniture ensembles from \$399 to more than \$1,000.

Patios often have refrigerators and coolers, fountains for tranquillity, chimenea

heaters for cool nights, a first-class sound system and accent lighting.

Even the old standby grill has seen a facelift. Stainless models with upward of 50,000 BTU heat outputs are favored by outdoor chefs. Warmers for sauces and side dishes are standard fare.

"There's no doubt furniture is an investment," said Cornwell, "but we see people ready to make the most of their outdoor dollars. The outdoors is where they want to be."

She said retailers have stepped up consumer information efforts to help buyers understand good-better-best options in outdoor furniture, appliances, and fabrics.

And in a new twist, patios have become the latest selling point for home buyers.

"A \$500 furniture set makes a patio look great, it adds curb appeal and buyers respond to that," said Cornwell. "People think a home is their largest investment, and buyers no longer see the patio as just that place out there. They want to live outdoors, too."

# Spring into action to repair winter damage

BY DAVID BRADLEY  
The Associated Press

You may think you're done with a tough winter, but what about your house?

Vicious freeze-thaw-refreeze cycles play havoc with your roof, windows, siding and gutters long after snow and cold yield to a warm spring sun. Toss in the impact of accumulated debris, and you've got a real mess.

In summary, one expert says your first spring projects may well be to repair damage inflicted by months of wintry onslaughts.

"Winter is hard enough, but if homeowners don't deal now with problems caused by snow and ice, they'll deal with winter after-effects all year long," said David Steed, vice president of exterior products for Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse.

His advice starts with a visual inspection of just about every exterior portion of the home. Some problems are more obvious than others, such as warped shingles and siding, gutters that sag or have pulled away from fascia board and leaking windows.

"Your roof is what really suffers," said Steed.

Snow melt can seep beneath shingles and refreeze at night. The moisture can damage shingles and leak into the home. If you have access to your attic, use a flashlight to look for wet spots in roof sub-layers above the rafters.

"Spot repairs to a roof can be effective, but if you miss tiny problems, you'll end up

with bigger troubles," said Steed, who estimates repair costs per square foot are far less for a total roof replacement than treating damage one small spot at a time.

Accumulated snow and ice can push gutters away from fascia board, leaving vulnerable eaves and roof edges prone to water damage. The expand-and-contract action of ice will wedge between gutter seams, a frequent cause of leaks.

Check windows carefully. Thermal windows installed as recently as 20 years ago may start to show their age.

"Tight seals are among the first things to go bad and your dollars will fly out the window. You won't see or feel the heat loss," said

Steed.

If the panes are fogged or wood casings are rotted, look into replacement windows.

Decks take a hit from winter, too.

"Ice and snow accumulations force the moisture into the wood and won't let it breathe. That's why an extraordinary number of decks need replacement every year," said Steed. "You go through that a couple of times and you turn to maintenance-free planking in a hurry."

He says wood-weary homeowners in the Midwest, Northeast and Atlantic states are increasingly attracted to planks, posts and railings formed by a mix of recycled plastics and wood chips.

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# Don't shave a door - shim it

With the wet season comes doors that bind. That can mean tugging hard to get doors open. Most folks' first instinct is to use a wood plane to sand or plane the door. Don't. Doors and windows usually don't move on their own - they need help. House shift is the main cause. When the ground gets wet, it expands and parts of the foundation move, resulting in an uneven floor. This can cause doors to shift in their openings. Planing or sanding the door slightly is OK, but it is better to adjust it at the hinges. Pull the pins out of the hinges - one at a time - and bend the rungs on the door hinge opposite from the way you want the door to move. If the knob edge of the door is rubbing against the frame, bend the top and bottom door hinges toward the frame that is being rubbed. When the door shrinks back into its original place in the summer, readjust the hinges.

# Caulk vs. putty

Putty is a doughlike compound used to fill in holes (from nails for example) and for surface defects or open spaces. Caulking is an old shipbuilding procedure of filling seams between planks to make a vessel watertight.

Today, caulking is used to prevent water damage on long seams, such as around windows and doors, outside - and around sinks, tubs and showers, inside. So, when dealing with holes or scratches, use putty. But to fill a long, open seam where water can leak, lay in a bead of waterproof caulk such as silicone.

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