

Your living room may be stepping outside

BY TOM TRACEY
Special to the Record-Eagle

What big-screen television and surround-sound stereos did for living rooms, coordinated outdoor furniture and barbecue islands are now doing to backyard living spaces.

Just ask Eric Doll, manager of the Spa Warehouse Outlet in Traverse City.

“Over the last six or seven years, one of the biggest trends is the outdoor living space,” he said. “It’s huge throughout the United States and especially around here. A lot of people want to spend more time outside entertaining with their family.”

And just how do you define outdoor living space?

“Outdoor living spaces are an extension of a living room, only placed outside. We have designers who can integrate their backyard kitchen, fireplace and spa as a coordinated unit,” said Doll.

His Cal Flame self-contained outdoor kitchen islands feature a variety of configurations, including such components as a rotisserie barbecue, a glass-front refrigerator and a built-in fireplace.

Not enough for your style of partying? How about adding a beverage tap, cocktail center, overhead lights, stereo and — get this — a waterfall, all integrated into a single island.

Choices are not limited to selecting kitchen components. Cal Flame features décor elements including brick, granite, rock, stone, tile or various colors of stucco finishes.

Since the Cal Flame is a commercial-grade barbecue, the brass burners and stainless-steel oven box are guaranteed for life.

“I’ve noticed outside

decks are doubling and tripling in size, and swim-in-place spas are really getting popular,” said Doll.

“With our scenery and weather, it’s the way to go.”

But what if your idea of backyard entertaining is a simple grill and folding chairs? What should you look for in a barbecue to ensure that it will still be cooking next spring?

Bill Misaras of Home Depot in Traverse City offered a hint.

“Take a look at what repair parts are stocked. If there aren’t many repair parts for a brand, it’s probably because it lasts,” he said.

According to Misaras, items to look for in a quality grill include heavy weight porcelain-enameled cast-iron grates (angled to flow grease away from the flames to avoid flare-ups), stainless-steel burners (running the length of the box for lasting performance and even heat) and a funneled bottom tray (to contain drip-pings away from the burners and off the patio).

And don’t scrimp on the grill cover — Misaras has seen many waterfront residents return to buy a quality fabric cover after watching their thin plastic cover shred from the elements.

Okay, you’ve drawn in all your friends, family and neighbors with the savory aroma of barbecue. Where will they gather?

Look for outdoor seating ideas at Max’s Patio in downtown Traverse City. Their Lloyd/Flanders line of traditional wicker furnishings are still woven on a loom originally designed in 1906, giving the furniture a substantial, graceful appearance. The materials are all-weather, and cushions can be ordered in various colors and patterns

(such as solid, striped, floral and graphic designs).

“People with lakefront houses and sun porches really enjoy the view from our patio furniture,” said sales consultant George Rokos. “We also sell a lot of porch swings.”

For casual elegance, Max’s also offers several lines of Lloyd/Flanders aluminum-framed furniture with a 12-year warranty. The Woodbridge, for example, is reminiscent of wrought iron, with curving lines and wide armrests.

Along with table and chair groupings, Max’s also displays individual adjustable chaise lounges and love seat gliders. Add matching accessories such as a butler’s tray table (a wheeled cart with a removable serving tray), and your guests will feel pampered.

What should you look for in quality outdoor furniture that will last?

“Run your hands over the material — it should be smooth,” said Rokos. “Tacks should be covered, and it should have a good aluminum frame.”

Forget about scratchy webbed folding chairs and tipsy plastic tables.

Home Depot carries Hampton Bay’s new Bamboo Collection, which is constructed of cast aluminum that is rust-resistant.

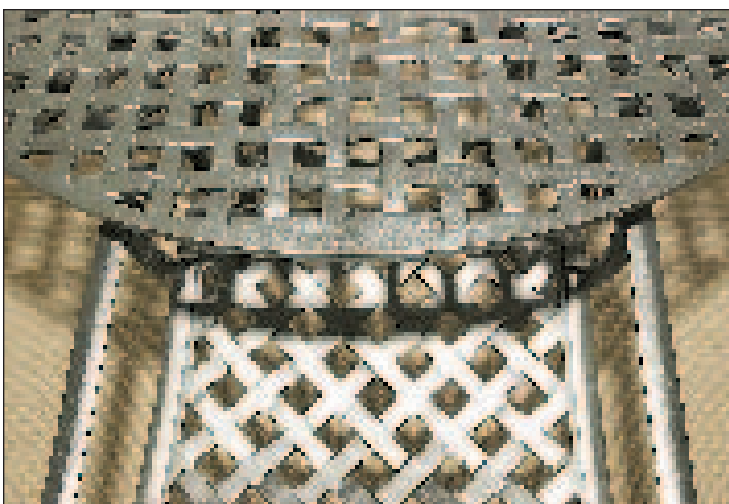
And currently on display at Target, in the Grand Traverse Mall, are a variety of living spaces featuring cushioned chairs, weather-resistant tables and powder-coated gazebos.

For example, their Garden Paradise Collection uses Indonesian hardwood to withstand outdoor elements while still creating the appearance of a living room. This mission-style set includes one round table, four matching cushioned

chairs and one coordinating umbrella for under \$300.

If rain clouds move in, no worries. For less than \$200, the Summer Island Gazebo will cover a 100-square foot area, and includes decorative lights for night-time entertaining.

Then, break out the stainless-steel outdoor serving cart with 20-quart-cooler.



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

Max’s Patio in Traverse City carries these wrought iron, 48-inch dining table and chairs.

Your guests will soon forget about the rain. Under \$200.

Once the sun sets and a chill creeps over the backyard, it’s time to stoke the porcelain fire bowl (under \$70). Toss in some firewood, light it and let it burn under the included dome mesh screen.

For those who love the outdoors but not what comes with it (such as insects and rain), a solution has arrived. Called the Oasis Patio Room, it is a maintenance-free, insulated

windowed room addition that is available in a variety of sizes, designs and colors. It’s available at Quality Built Windows in Traverse City.

Outdoor kitchen islands, designer furniture, lifetime barbecue grills, fire pits, gazebos — items such as these have become available to meet the increasing demand of customers who want their back yard to be the center of their social gatherings.

Why are people extending

their living rooms to the outside?

“They can go out in their backyard and barbecue, or soak in a hot tub. They can have friends over and watch their kids play. If it rains, they still have an overhang to protect them. At night, they can light the outdoor fireplace and relax outside. It is a very relaxing lifestyle,” said Doll.

Tom Tracey is a local freelance writer.



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