

Tips for Creating Your Dream Space by Sara Shragal

Bringing the indoors out

How to set up the perfect outdoor kitchen.

Back in the old west, an “outdoor kitchen” meant roughing it over an open fire and sleeping on the ground. In today’s world, innovative homeowners are taking that term a bit more literally by actually bringing kitchen items beyond the grill outdoors. As a result, cooking in your outdoor kitchen has become more than just a summertime activity—in some cases, its turned into a year-round luxury.

As with any project, the first question is, where do I start? For starters, the centerpiece of all kitchens is the cooking area. With the outdoor kitchen, that means the grill. What kind of grill best suits an outdoor kitchen? It really depends on your personal taste and needs, but here are some styles and some features you might want to take into consideration:

- Stainless steel gas or charcoal grills – outdoor kitchen means just that: outside sun, rain, wind and in some places, snow. Even covered, your grill will be exposed to the elements to a certain degree, so you want a grill made of material that will withstand bad weather and corrosion.
- Free-standing or under-the-counter refrigeration units – helps minimize trips to the “other” kitchen and gives you a place to store leftovers for the next cookout.
- Infra-red burners – make sure the grill you do select uses infra-red burners, which heat up faster.
- Storage – choose a grill with plenty of shelving and cabinets

Remember, in setting up your outdoor kitchen, you want to arrange things in a way that reduces trips to the real kitchen so you can spend more time with your guests. So the more you can store outside, the fewer trips to the house you’ll need.

Speaking of guests, furnishing your outdoor kitchen and dining area should take their comfort into consideration, too. When it comes to selecting furniture for your outdoor “living/dining room,” there are a number of options in terms of style—sling, metal, cushioned and strapped to name a few--and materials—aluminum, iron, resin, teak, wood, wicker, fabric and vinyl.

A safe rule of thumb for decorating outdoors is this: unless you’re planning to buy an entire set of outdoor furniture at once, stick with neutral colors like white, taupe or sandstone. Even if the shades aren’t a perfect match, it won’t matter if there’s a little distance between items.

One rather unique look that’s become increasingly popular is driftwood. Driftwood patio furniture is constructed from wood taken from weather-beaten areas, islands, river beaches, etc. The true beauty of driftwood, besides the natural, back-to-mother-earth appeal, is that no two pieces are alike. So you literally can create your own unique look for your patio. For example,

making your own outdoor coffee or accent table can be as simple as purchasing a distinctive driftwood table base and securing a piece of glass on top of it.

Another wood that's become more popular as buying green becomes more commonplace is bamboo. Besides being environmentally friendly to make, bamboo is one of the strongest materials in the world for furniture.

It's also quite versatile. All types of patio furniture and accessories are available with bamboo construction—tables, rocking chairs, chairs, shades, umbrellas, stools, side tables, coffee tables, photo frames and even rugs. So you can literally create your own “bamboo room” outside.

As you can tell, there are a number of options available for creating your own “outdoor kitchen” and, at first glance, you could feel a little overwhelmed! Just remember that cooking and eating outdoors is supposed to be a fun activity you can share with family and friends. Take the same approach to decorating your outdoor kitchen and patio area. Even if you have to build it one piece at a time, the idea is to do it as a family and have fun.

Sara Shragal is a staff writer for DirectBuy. For more information or other helpful tips for your home, visit www.directbuycares.com. You can send suggestions for future columns to questions@directbuycares.com.