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Outdoor living spaces feature sofas, kitchens and fireplaces

This page: Outdoor living spaces can mimic those indoors with deep seating, area rugs and dining areas as designed by Bell Tower Outdoor Living Co. Opposite page: Homeowners are turning backyards into outdoor oases such as this pool area with waterfall and perennial plantings designed by Great Lakes Landscape. Preceding page: By strategically placing seating areas within a landscape, outdoor living spaces like this one created by Great Lakes Landscapes, offer several spaces for a quiet retreat.





A large, clear blue swimming pool is the central focus, bordered by a light-colored concrete deck. A decorative stone waterfall flows into the pool from a raised stone planter bed. The planter bed is filled with various green plants and colorful flowers. In the background, a white vinyl fence runs across the yard, with dense green trees behind it. A metal pool ladder is visible on the right side of the pool.

Ch, the perfect living room.

Comfortable, cushioned sofas, a stone fireplace, a quiet nook for reading, music and lighting, just steps away from the refrigerator and grill. Imagine all this with no walls or ceiling.

Welcome to the outdoor living space, a landscape concept that has come into its own in Southwest Michigan.

Outdoor living spaces "are about getting out of the house and into the fresh air in an area that's homey and comfortable," says Joel DeVisser, landscape designer and vice president of DeVisser Landscape Services, in Oshtemo Township.

Outdoor living spaces are like having an outdoor house, says Sherry Kuzma, owner and designer of Great Lakes Landscapes, in Schoolcraft. "Clients ask for things like outdoor kitchens, dining areas with large tables to seat eight or more, a big pool area and play areas for kids," she says. "Essentially, we are creating outdoor

rooms and turning people's backyards into retreats and, in some cases, resorts."

A number of factors are spurring homeowners to turn their yards into open-air places to play, eat, entertain and relax. DeVisser credits this trend partly to people's growing awareness of nature and their desire to be out in it.

"People are really getting in tune with nature, and it's becoming popular in these cold-weather states to enjoy being outdoors when you can and as much as you can by making a space that lets you do that nearly three-quarters of the year," he says.

Kuzma says the slower economy and the rise in popularity of home-renovation television shows have also made people seek sanctuary in their backyards.

"A lot of people that used to travel now want to stay at home, so they are turning their yards into retreats," she says. "Whether the space is large or small, clients

want an area where they can entertain and have a party as well as just relax."

Shows such as HGTV's *Landscape Smart* and *Bodacious Backyards* and as well as DIY Network's *Desperate Landscapes* are influencing our inclination to move outdoors.

"While the shows often feature outdoor spaces designed for places with nice year-round climates," says Kuzma, "the development of new materials lets us recreate similar spaces here. They will be just as durable."

For example, polymeric sand is reviving the use of interlocking pavers and bricks for patios, walkways and courtyards. The tendency for weeds and ants to take up residence in the cracks between the pavers had made homeowners hesitant to install them.

"You just sweep this polymeric sand into the joints and activate it and it hardens up. It flexes with the weather, so it's very durable, but it keeps the weeds and ants out," explains DeVisser.

With proper prepping, even existing brick and paver patios can be retrofitted with the polymeric sand, says DeVisser.

Fireplaces and firepits are high on the must-have list for outdoor living spaces. We aren't talking open campfires here: location-specific codes regulate firepits in urban and suburban areas, including their size, placement and construction and the materials that can be burned. For instance, both Portage and Kalamazoo require a permit to have an outdoor recreational fireplace. Kalamazoo requires that the fireplaces be commercially produced or have their design approved by the fire marshal.

Knowing this, manufacturers of outdoor fireplaces have developed models that are increasingly functional while being law-abiding. Ashleigh Kosin, co-owner of Bell Tower Outdoor Living Co., in Richland, says one of the store's biggest sellers is an outdoor coffee table that converts into a firepit.

"It has gas logs with glass and granite and is a true centerpiece," she explains. "It even



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has a drop-in ice pit that can be used to cool beverages when the table is not being used as a fireplace."

Finding comfortable and lasting outdoor furniture has also become easier. The furniture industry has developed products that are ideal for varying climates and have enhanced comfort levels, says Kuzma.

Many people are investing in "deep seating" options — sofas, couches and sectionals that mimic what they might have indoors. Add touches like rugs, throw pillows and lanterns and you have a living room outdoors.

"People have been a little leery about using furniture with cushions outside," says Kosin, "but the main thing is to buy an acrylic cushion that has an outdoor fabric and that's acrylic all the way through. The polyester cushions you find at the big box stores just don't hold up like the acrylic."

Taking care of the furniture can be as simple as investing in covers for bad-weather days and bringing the cushions indoors during the winter. But if cushions do get wet during

the occasional rainstorm, Kosin says, you simply unzip the covers and let them drain and dry out.

Before you put time and effort into creating an outdoor living space, it's recommended you consult with experts who understand not only the climate of Southwest Michigan but also the products available.

"It's important to work with local stores and companies who know what works in Michigan's climate. A lot of the furnishings you see in catalogs are more suited for year-

'round climates and won't hold up in Michigan," says Kosin.

Kuzma, who admits she's a regular HGTV watcher, sees the same downside to the products seen on home decorating and renovation shows.

"People want what they see on television but may not realize that it is developed for an entirely different climate than what we have," she says. "But we do know what works here and will design lovely spaces based on their wants and Michigan's reality."

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