

The Great Outdoors



Photo courtesy of Frontgate.

American homes are performing a role reversal as our favorite indoor rooms move outdoors.

by Sharise Cunningham

Whether it's the backyard, back nine or back kitchen, the yard out back has become a new sort of oasis for today's homeowners. Most industry designers and manufacturers agree that the recent boom in home refinancing and a renewed interest in nesting have led many homeowners to use the natural environment as the new living environment.

applied to exterior design. Design-focused spaces that incorporate color, furniture, fireplaces and appliances, as well as electronics, all surrounded by carefully planned landscaping are becoming increasingly popular.

Outdoor furniture

The past few years have seen new outdoor furniture selections that feature softer fabrics, more design details, and deep and inviting cushions that are designed for the ultimate in comfort and durability.

"If it is durable homeowners want it," says Amy Crowley, spokesperson for Frontgate, a home environment direct retailer. "They're not looking to replace their outdoor furnishings year after year anymore—just like they wouldn't want to have to replace their indoor furniture [annually]." This increased demand for materials that are going to last and withstand the elements makes materials such as teak, wrought iron, cast aluminum, weatherproof wicker and resin very popular, she says.

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silver will have a big fashion presence for 2003 as well, with black and teak combined for an especially fresh look this year.

Other key trends in outdoor furniture for spring 2003 according to AFMA include:

- **Group seating.** Tables are often several feet long and can accommodate 10 or more comfortably. Dining chairs are wider with higher backs for added comfort.
- **Conversation groups.** These low seating groups are ideal for the outdoor casual lifestyle and are perfect for serving beverages and light foods, game playing or just conversing.
- **New tabletops.** Alternative materials such as tumbled marble, tile, stone, slate, punched metal and other natural stones are replacing traditional glass.
- **Elevated seating.** These high seats and tables (left) are designed so you can easily enjoy the view over the rail of your deck or balcony. Also popular are elevated bars with barstools for casual entertaining.

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Lights and heat

Lighting trends include fashionable floor lamps with water-and fade-resistant shades, recessed lighting, open-flame gaslights that reflect the charm of Charleston and mood-setting dimmer lights. Sensory Solutions uses an astronomical time clock to regulate lighting operation.

Outdoor heating can range from sophisticated heated floors to stainless steel outdoor heaters, much like those you see on restaurant patios. The cost of a heated floor will depend on a variety of factors including the size of the room to be heated. A stainless steel heater with enough output to heat up to a 15 foot radius will cost between \$395 and \$495.

Regardless of how elaborate your outdoor space is, reconnecting with nature can be a great way to expand your home's living and entertainment areas—not to mention for you to relax and unwind.

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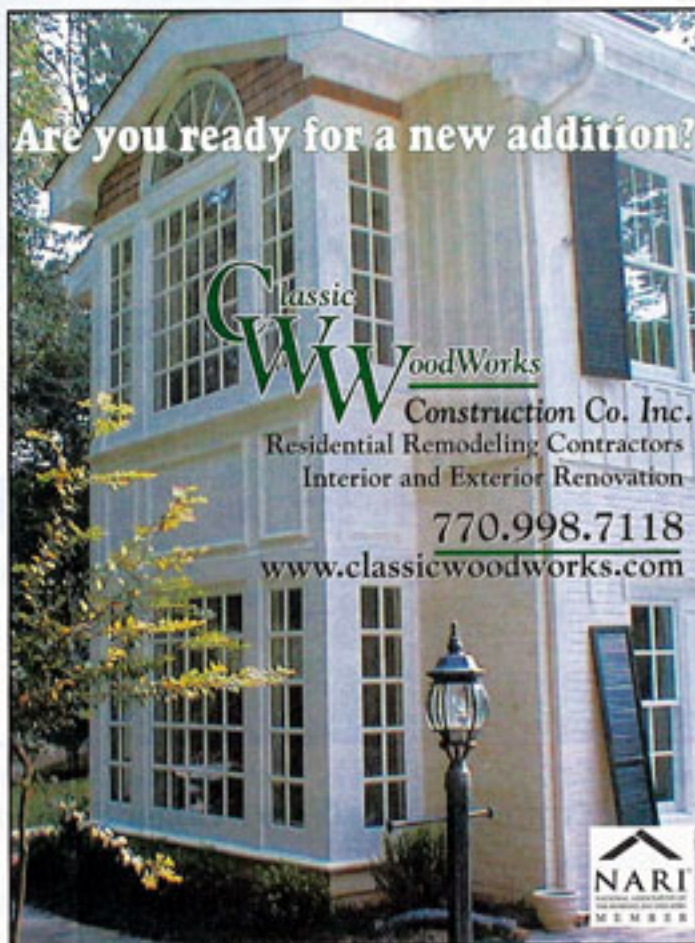
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Kitchens. "Now," he continues, "you see extravagant flooring, refrigeration, heating, fireplaces and lighting. It's not just going outside, grilling a steak and bringing it back inside. You have the whole experience outdoors."

Sales of high-end grills (those \$2,500 and more) are up 40 percent, while gas grill sales are up just over 10 percent. Williams believes that the biggest trend in home kitchens will move from an after-market addition to a pre-construction design element. The current interest in adding outdoor rooms has led new homebuyers to seek homes that already include this feature.

For those who still love to cook outdoors but prefer more portable cooking options, the Big Green Egg or the Flattop Grill by Evo (pictured on next page) might be excellent choices. The commercial grade Flattop Grill is made of stainless steel, the round solid-steel cooking surface atop a triangular base gives it a charmingly deceptive look of simplicity. Its versatility allows you to cook directly on

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diminutive 9-and-a-half-inch grid (cooking surface) Mini (\$199); the 13-inch grid Small (\$399); the 15-inch grid Medium (\$599); and the granddaddy of them all, an 18.25-inch grid Large (\$799). A number of accessories help customize the use of each Green Egg.

According to Williams, Florida and California have sold pre-constructed outdoor kitchens, or lanais, for years. Atlanta and the Midwest are beginning to see the same trend as new ideas in enclosures and heating create year-round outdoor rooms.

All fired up

Just as inside, a fireplace often provides a dramatic focal point for outdoor spaces. Over the past two years, full-sized real wood-burning or gas fireplaces began replacing the once-popular chiminea. The choices range from 36-inch to 50-inch fireplaces with stone surrounds, to the feisty and unique firepot, or the simple and portable fire dish.

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Photo courtesy of Earthfire.

adding ambient lighting. "They're so much more beautiful than a bright bulb sitting in your face," Heeth says.

For a more rustic look, the Earthfire firepot (left) might be just right. Much like the Big Green Egg smoker, the Earthfire is based on the Asian Kamado design. The Earthfire is a fusion of art and function. No two are the same because each one is completely hand-made, numbered and signed with the artist's insignia.

The Earthfire firepot is finished in the Japanese process of Raku ("fire magic"), giving it a high-gloss crackled finish with some color variation. Even the stand is made of hand-hammered wrought iron. It costs \$1,900 for the wood-burning model and \$2,200 for the gas/propane model. Best of all, that investment can outlast your current home because when you move, the Earthfire can go with you.

Earthfire owner Sharon Black notes, "outdoor fireplaces are almost a necessity now. People love the warmth of a fire on cool,

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Gone are the days of muffled music behind closed doors. The party can flow in a seemingly contiguous space from inside to outside as home entertainment systems take on the outdoors. Outdoor rooms can now be built to house and protect all of the equipment year round. While the components remain "inside," camouflaged speakers can be placed throughout the yard and operated by remote control.

"Our products can't be seen, they're heard," says Chris Thomas, marketing manager for Sensory Solutions, an audio/video design group that installs all-weather speakers, and outdoor video, audio and lighting. The more unique methods of hiding speakers are placing them in speaker rocks (left), gardens, hanging baskets or building them inside a stacked-stone fireplace.

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