

The Backyard Oasis

Create your own summer getaway—with no crowds and no hunt for a parking space.

Written by LAUREN PAYNE

ON THE GRID

(Below) Patio stones, different from those around the pool, designate this space as the outdoor living room. The elaborate fireplace can be used year-round.

HOT SPOT

(Bottom) The hot tub is elevated in a secluded area above the pool. “The kids love it,” says Chris Cipriano, “but the parents take it over.”



ESPITE THE TROUBLED ECONOMY, it still makes sense to invest in your home. Many New Jersey homeowners aren't just maintaining, they're improving their residences, and in some cases creating spectacular resort-like retreats in their own backyards. Complete with pools, hot tubs, and waterfalls, gourmet outdoor kitchens, cozy firepits or elaborate masonry fireplaces, and enough comfortable seating for a crowd, these spaces rival the Ritz.

Backyards are not just a stand-alone grill, a picnic table, and a couple of chaise lounges around a pool anymore, says Chris Cipriano of Cipriano Landscape Design in Ramsey, whose firm has won numerous awards for designing and building these grand retreats. “We find that people want to spend more time at home and want to bring the family together, to keep the kids around.” Even if you're not breaking ground on a new pool or major landscape project, adding a few well-designed stand-alone elements can make your backyard more inviting and involving.

NATURAL BEAUTY

(Above) Every element, from the stone patio and waterfall to the gently curved pool, enhances the sensation of unity. Mature plants were re-planted after the excavation.

KID HEAVEN

(Right) Although the slide is fiberglass, it's abundantly surrounded with plants to blend into the landscape. “This is the backyard to be in for every kid in the neighborhood,” says Chris Cipriano.



So What's Hot?

The basic grill has some brawny new cousins—gourmet cooking centers complete with running water, refrigeration, elaborate rotisserie grills, and ample counter space to prepare, then serve the meal. Appliance manufacturers have gotten savvy; many offer appliances that withstand the often-harsh outdoor elements. Sleek countertop materials, such as limestone, granite, and concrete, naturally hold up to the weather, allowing these outdoor kitchens to be operational 24/7, twelve months a year.

Similarly, furniture companies have jumped on the bandwagon, offering more weather-resistant fabrics and furnishings, from chic bistro tables and chairs to stylish bar stools and comfortable dining sets designed for lingering. A pergola or other hardscape can define the dining area, creating an intimate setting under sun or stars.

Simple pools are giving way to infinity-edge types that also have hot tubs and, sometimes, a water slide for the kids. Moving-water features, such as a fountain or waterfall, are especially popular, says Cipriano.

“They can make you feel like you’re deep in nature, like you’re in another place,” he explains. “Plus, no two waterfalls are the same. We use different stones to always create something unique.”

Speaking of stones, another trend is deep stone carving—the art of intricately cutting medallions and borders into a stone floor, resulting in a “rug” that mimics a Persian pattern, for instance. “It’s an outdoor rug carved in stone,” Cipriano says. It can also be done on countertops and backsplashes.

Other enticing backyard amenities: outdoor heaters, insect-repelling misting systems, high-tech surround-sound, and outdoor screening rooms. Clearly, the sky’s the limit.

“These backyards can feel like you’ve left New Jersey and are in some tropical place far away,” Cipriano says. “It’s a vacation setting at home.” ■

COCKTAILS ANYONE?

This freestanding stainless-steel cart serves it all up in style. The deluxe station includes ice storage, a sink and faucet, drain board and cutting board, towel bar, and more than ample bottle storage. Lynx CocktailPro, approximately \$3,000 at lynxgrills.com.



COOKING WITH GAS

Feed a crowd with this high-performance grill featuring three main burners along with a warming drawer, a rotisserie kit, and a smoker box. Sophisticated LEDs track fuel use. Kitchen-Aid 48-inch freestanding grill, approximately \$5,499 at kitchenaid.com.



SMOKIN' Cook anything from a slab of ribs to entire turkeys in this extra-large-capacity smoker. A gravity feed charcoal system automatically lights fresh coals as old ones burn off. Viking Outdoor Gravity Feed Smoker, approximately \$3,000 at vikingrange.com.



ALL WEATHER Lynx cooktops are augmented by wood cabinetry that is weather-resistant. These outdoor cabinets come in a variety of wood and door styles. Simply use a garden hose to clean. Atlantis Outdoor Cabinetry, pricing varies. atlantiscabinetry.com.

Take it to the Limit

A backyard is only as memorable as its details. Chris Cipriano suggests these special features:

CARVED STONE CORBELS and balusters to adorn outdoor cabinetry. “The outdoor kitchen has as much intricate detail as the indoors.”

VOLCANIC FIREPITS built into the sides of waterfalls. The fire—about 4 feet wide, jumping 2 feet in the air—looks like red-hot lava. “It’s an elaborate system of hydraulics and water, and it actually looks like a volcano.”

GLASS TILE INLAYS in the bottom of pools. Glass tile, a 95% recycled product, is gaining popularity in all sorts of applications including backsplashes, but glistens particularly beautifully in pool settings.

WISCONSIN LIMESTONE as a pool deck. Its naturally light color and tremendous density mean it doesn’t absorb summer heat so feet stay cool. It is more expensive, but “it’s the perfect stone.”



CENTER OF ATTENTION This high-style refreshment center includes all the essentials: faucet, cutting board, bottle opener, insulated bottle bath, storage, and an assortment of condiment trays. Viking Outdoor Built-In Refreshment Center, approximately \$3,300 at vikingrange.com.