



Homeowners Turn Outdoors Into Living Space

With the continued trend of strong home sales and interest in home decoration and renovation, outdoor living spaces have become a major consideration for homeowners. For apartments and town homes, the balcony or deck area becomes another room in a small space.

For houses, a backyard area is a perfect spot for family dinners and a place to relax during the long hot days of summer. For the retailer, this is a perfect way to sell patio furniture, decking, and other accessories to make the outdoor living spaces comfortable and ideal for entertaining in the warm weather.

It is a sector which is growing. Retail sales of casual and outdoor furniture hit \$4.8 billion in 2005. With more discretionary income and a focus on home improvement, the casual and outdoor furniture market has been growing and will continue to change and expand with the trends coming from the established furniture sector.

With that, comes innovations in style, design, fabric, and materials to fit all budgets.

Outdoor spaces are definitely multi-functional. For entertaining friends and family, there needs to be adequate space for seating as well as for accessories. When planning an outdoor space, consideration of a dining area, a lounging area, and, when possible, a cooking area, are the big three. Choice of materials will determine the need for storage for these areas.

MATERIALS

Patio furniture materials are a growing category. Here's the most popular at different price points:

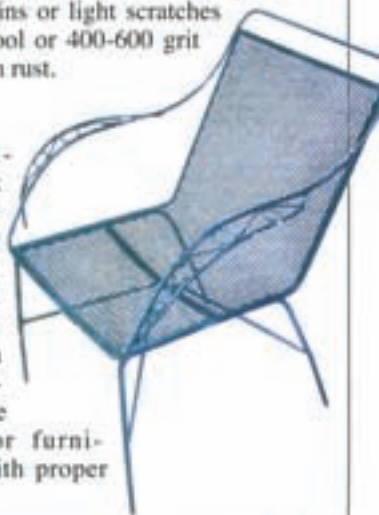
ALUMINUM

Lightweight and easily moved, aluminum furniture is weather-resistant, available in a variety of finishes and highly affordable. Aluminum comes in a wide array of styles. Its appeal lends itself to any style of décor.

It can be left outside, but to extend its use, placing it in a storage area or using covers are good options. For yearly maintenance, a coat of automotive wax or paste wax will help protect the finish. For cleaning during the summer season, liquid dish detergent will remove most stains; use toothpaste on stubborn stains or light scratches and steel wool or 400-600 grit sandpaper on rust.

TEAK

A hardwood that has become popular for its rich dark colour and exotic style, this is a more expensive choice for outdoor furniture, but with proper



care will last a lifetime. Teak has become a popular choice for people seeking a more contemporary style for their outdoor space. It can be left outside and its top layer will become a silver/gray hue like other woods (pine, oak, cedar). Excessive moisture can cause pieces to crack or split over time. To extend its life, covers or storage are necessary. To maintain the rich dark colour of teak furniture, a furniture oil should be applied yearly and liquid detergent used for occasional cleaning. Sanding the furniture will remove the silvery/gray hue in order to restore the darker tones of this wood. If paint is a consideration, an oil-based exterior enamel and top coat of marine varnish are recommended.

WICKER/RATTAN

Wicker has always been a favourite for traditional outdoor spaces and this category has changed from just white wicker. With banana leaf, rattan, and other exotic sources, the variety of natural hues gives the option to avoid paint and to incorporate into a more contemporary style and have also extended the prices to a slightly higher bracket than just wicker. Furniture made from these natural products are very susceptible to Mother Nature's effects. Sun dries out the material and will break it down over time (which is why a lot of wicker is painted) and moisture will also negatively affect the material. It is best stored in a dark dry storage area, preferably indoors. For maintenance, water is the easiest to use on dirt. For painted pieces, a yearly touch-up with outdoor enamel will keep it in tip top shape.

IRON/METAL

Another popular choice from the traditional category, manufacturers are now providing pieces in more contemporary styles and lightweight versions. Traditional iron is solid and heavy and had a higher price tag due to its longer life. With maintenance to prevent rust, iron furniture can last a lifetime. A wire brush or steel wool can remove small pieces of rust from furniture. Check areas underneath and legs each year as these areas are the most susceptible to rust. Covers are generally recommended for the winter to prevent rust and every few years a new coat of rust-resistant oil enamel will extend pieces backyard life.

RESIN

This is the most popular choice for outdoor furniture and highly affordable. Generally styled traditionally, resin furniture doesn't have the huge range of colours or styles since it is created for a low price-point. It can be left outside without any protection, but over time will crack from extended exposure to extreme heat and cold. Maintenance is very basic. Use a wet cloth to clean away any accumulated dirt. Avoid the use of abrasive cleansers or anything with bleach as it will affect the colour and finish.

CUSHIONS

This category has expanded with a myriad of colours and textures and the creation of a weather-resistant fabric, made to survive the extremes of sun and rain. Washing with mild detergent will alleviate any stains and through the winter months it's recommended that these cushions be stored in a dry spot to prevent mould and mildew.



These materials are also used for umbrellas and awnings.

STYLES

Traditional or contemporary, outdoor furniture takes its cues from indoor furniture trends. The three main trends are Southern Traditional, Casual, and Exotic.

SOUTHERN TRADITIONAL

Usually iron, wicker/rattan or wood, this style incorporates carving or details in the chairs as well as rectangular or circular glass-topped umbrella tables for dining. The thick cushions come in florals or small patterns. Colours are usually a pastel palette of yellow, orange, pink, and red as well as pale green or blue.

CASUAL

Resin and aluminum are the key materials in this category with simple style chairs, especially imitating the popular Adirondack or Muskoka style chair. Dining tables would be square or circular umbrella tables. Colours are usually red, white, or blue, embracing a nautical theme or neutrals such as grey, beige, or tan.

EXOTIC

Wood, wicker/rattan, or iron are the most popular materials of this style, reminiscent of a South Pacific isle or the Caribbean. Wood dining tables or a combination of wood and iron as well as slat-back chairs and loungers are part of this style. Colours are usually brights – such as red, fuchsia, or chartreuse – or neutrals – white, black, or grey.

ACCESSORIES

Not just chairs, tables, and lounge chairs any longer, accessories now include firepits for cooler nights and outdoor lighting. Lighting is a range from oil torches and candles to environmentally-friendly solar lighting. As with interiors, outdoor lighting is done at all levels to illuminate paths and walkways, for dining, and gathering areas as well as lanterns or sconces above for overall ambience. Built-in cooking areas can incorporate a grill, as well as outdoor burners, oven, a sink, and even fridges.

DECKS

Decks are still very traditional. However, many people want to avoid the look of pressure-treated wood, with its green hue, and are turning to alternative decking made from resin, which will last longer and has very little maintenance, which is something to consider with its higher price-point for installation. For backyard areas, stone and brick are popular, but are not inexpensive endeavours. However, as with the resin decking, they do last longer than wood and have less maintenance issues than with loose rock.

With the variety of styles and sources for patio furniture, any budget can be accommodated. It's just a matter of the retailer helping their customer figure out what needs they have for their outdoor space and how to plan for winter storage.

After that, it's all about cold drinks and a hot barbeque. **O**