



Outdoor Living

With Memorial Day ahead, this week-end is the official start to summer entertaining: Time to sweep off the deck, pull out the patio furniture, fire up the barbie, and invite a few friends over for a cold beverage. If you haven't begun to prepare for outdoor entertaining, here are some things to consider.

Whether your outdoor space is a small balcony, old concrete patio, wrap-around wood deck or a complete outdoor kitchen, now is the time to utilize that space and reward yourself with an expanded living area. During these warmer months, take advantage of your outdoor space, and make it a special area for family members to read, eat or simply enjoy being outside.

First, determine which part of your yard can be used for a seating area. Once you have a particular spot of in mind, insure that it is level and clear of weeds and debris. Then clear the area of toys, pet beds, empty planters or other unnecessary or unsightly items. This space should be a comfortable and relaxing retreat for you, so take the time to relocate any unnecessary items elsewhere.

Spray or sweep your patio or deck, and consider whether you might sand or re-stain any old wood. After preparing the surface, you can also cover this area with a weatherproof rug, especially made for outdoor living. This will add color and texture, as well as designate the seating area.

Once the area in question is cleared and defined, add a table and chairs. A simple picnic, card or patio table can be used if you don't have a matching patio set. You may even consider bringing a wood table outside for the season, especially if your outdoor space is protected from the elements. Chairs can be accessorized with pillows for additional color and comfort. Place a pot or vase of flowers on the table. Add an umbrella if you have one.

Other fun and interesting outdoor accessories may include a tablecloth with attachable weights to secure the corners, a lazy Susan or flower planter which encircles the umbrella pole, outdoor lanterns or torches to add light and ambience, a free-standing fire pit, an outdoor fountain, a candle chandelier to hang from the eaves, and large galvanized buckets or plant stands in which to ice bottles of soda, wine or beer.

Decorate the surroundings with pots of plants and flowers, grouped and varied in height. Insure that your view from the immediate area is pleasing, as well: Mow the lawn, trim the trees, and wrap outdoor lights around nearby branches. Add a birdfeeder, wind chime, hammock, or birdbath for additional interest.

Once you have created a comfortable outdoor space, prepare to entertain there. Insure that you have enough chairs for all your guests. Cover the table with a washable cloth, and repeat its colors in the plates, flatware and serving pieces. The colors needn't match exactly, but stay within the same palette, for this will create a cohesive look.

The food can be kept simple, as it is a barbecue, after all. If you have a man available who likes to grill, let him be responsible the meat, and maybe some veggies. A cold side salad, some bread or dessert, and the meal is complete. Remember, with a nice setting, good company, and a reason to celebrate, your guests are really there to socialize and enjoy themselves; keep the food simple, fresh and easy.

Speaking of food, make an attempt to coordinate the serving bowls and utensils with the rest of your tabletop. Also, keep your eyes out for inventive screen covers made to be placed over the serving platters and protect the food from bugs.

Now, speaking of bugs, they can be a nuisance at certain times of the year. Mosquito lanterns and meat bee traps can be effective, and bowls of sugar water can also keep bugs at bay. It may take some trail and error, but it is certainly worth the effort. Put these tools in place an hour before your get-together, to increase their effectiveness. Place a small selection of sunscreens or bug sprays and wipes in a basket for your guests to use.

Have a ping pong table, wading pool, or crochet set out and available for your more active guests, and for the truly competitive, organize a tournament. Eventually you can create an outdoor area that serves many needs, and if large enough, encourages people to meander and be greeted around each corner by a touch of beauty and whimsy.

Happy Memorial Day!

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