

Great outdoor entertaining spaces

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Summer's here and the time is right for outdoor entertaining. But being the host with the most is tough when your venue is lacking.

If you're in the market for a new deck or patio, there's plenty to consider before you go out and build — or have someone build you — a backyard paradise.

Quality-made decks or patios are expensive. A professional job could set you back \$15,000. You can go the DIY route, which is cheaper, just be sure you know what you're getting yourself into.

With prime patio and deck season upon us, we spoke with several GTA deck and patio contractors — all members in good standing with Landscape Ontario (www.landscapentario.com) — for tips on creating great outdoor spaces.

Think about it

First, envision your space. How do you want to use it? Entertaining, cooking, dining, lounging — all of the above? How many people will you be entertaining? This will help you figure out what you require in terms of space and amenities.

Other considerations: Do you want shade? Any views you'd like to obstruct? How about potential noise issues?

"These all are questions I ask in order to come up with a concept plan to show clients how a deck or patio will fit into their yard," says Adam Gracey, owner of D.A. Gracey & Associates in Vaughan (www.dagracey.com).

Deck or patio?

The answer is largely determined by the layout of your home. "If you walk out to the back of your house through your kitchen doors, and the kitchen is six inches off the ground, you'll probably be into a patio scenario," Gracey explains. "If your kitchen is 10 feet off the ground, you're likely going to be into a decking situation."

If your kitchen is in the sweet spot — three feet off the ground, for example — you could have a deck-patio



DREAMSTIME

An expansive deck with a stone feature makes this backyard an outdoor haven.

combo: a deck with barbecue and lounging area with steps down to a patio.

“You might have people gathered up on the deck having quiet conversation and others on the patio gathered around a fire pit,” suggests Gary Nordeman of the Landmark Group in Thornbury (www.thelandmarkgroup.ca).

If you’re DIYing, it’s still a good idea to have a pro help with project plans. You can pay a professional landscape designer to do drawings; some building centres will create a plan for you for free if you buy your materials from them.

Decked out

There is nothing wrong with a simple, one-level deck with enough space for entertaining.

Depending on space and money, though, a deck can become quite elaborate, with different levels and sections for cooking, dining and lounging.

In terms of lumber, the substructure of a deck — beams, posts and anything that touches the ground and can rot — is generally made from pressure-treated wood.

For the parts of the deck you see, cedar is the go-to wood, contractors say. “Most of our work is with cedar decking,” Nordeman says. Small wonder: it’s a pleasant looking, softer wood and it smells great. But cedar’s downside is that it turns grey. You can stain it, but you’ll need to repeat the tedious process every year.

To save money you could do the whole deck in pressure-treated lumber.

Contractors sometimes use a composite wood on a deck’s horizontal surfaces — floorboards, tops of handrails, stair treads — and cedar on vertical surfaces, which are subject to less wear and tear.

If you’re putting in a railing, consider tempered glass instead of wood pickets, so you can enjoy views of your garden in all its glory.

Neighbours a bit close? Create privacy screening. A line of narrow columnar trees works well, says Peter Guinane of Oriole Landscaping in Toronto (www.orirolelandscaping.com). Cedar and spruce trees are well suited for narrow spaces, too. If you don’t have room for plantings, build a wood wall.

Patio perfection

The design of your patio is shaped by what you plan to use it for: cooking, dining, entertaining and/or lounging.

Cooking tends to be the focal point of a great outdoor space; guests tend to migrate toward the spot where food is being prepared. To welcome them, place your barbecue next to a patio set. Or go all out and install a kitted-out outdoor kitchen, with a grill built into a stone counter and a fridge and wine cooler to keep your visitors happy.

Materials-wise, you can go with natural stone (flagstone) or concrete pavers, which are available in a variety of styles, textures and colours.

Pavers are cheaper than flagstone, but Guinane says they don’t age as nicely. “My clients typically prefer the look of natural stone because it’s more authentic. And 10 years down the road natural stone looks like old world stone, whereas a concrete paver looks like an old sidewalk.”

You could do a blend of natural stone and pavers, keeping the budget in check while still having the look of real stone in spots.

Regardless, the key to a long-lasting patio is proper preparation. If the sand below the pavers isn't compacted properly, the stones will sink. And flagstone might require a poured concrete base.

For privacy, in addition to planting trees, water features are a good way to drown out sound, whether it's from neighbours or a busy road. "An ambient water feature will deaden a lot of noise," Gracey says.

Bells and whistles

With the major elements of your deck or patio covered, let's turn to finishing features:

Lighting: On a deck it's important to light grade changes, Gracey notes, if only so guests who've had a few pops don't end up tumbling down the stairs. Lights can be installed between treads, on railings, or underneath benches so they flood the deck surface. On a patio, lighting can showcase your garden, spotlight a tree, install decorative lampposts or bounce light off a fence to bathe the yard in a softer light. "You don't want to light it up like a parking lot," Guinane says.

Heating: Considering what little time Canadians have to enjoy the outdoors, heating your back deck or patio is essential to prolonging the pleasure. "People are spending big bucks on landscaping and this allows them to get as much out of it as they can," says Gracey. You could use a heat lamp, or go with a more traditional fireplace or natural stone fire-pit. Fire bowls and linear heaters — akin to what you might see at a steakhouse — are other possibilities.

Hot tubs: Speaking of staying warm, Jacuzzis help. Options here include a fibreglass tub that sits above grade, suitable for a deck, or a custom-designed concrete bath that's built into the ground. The difference is price: An above-ground hot tub will cost under \$10,000 and a concrete tub could run you \$50,000-plus, Gracey says.

Technology: To up the entertainment ante, install a large TV on your deck or patio. Imagine watching the big game while soaking in the Jacuzzi, or turning your backyard into an outdoor cinema for family movie night. And don't forget the outdoor sound system — no patio or deck would be complete without one.

What it'll cost you

The price tag for a new deck or patio depends on how high-end you go and how many features you want. The contractors we consulted advised budgeting between \$15,000 to \$20,000 for a professionally done job. "For an extra thousand bucks you'll be getting something that will last 20 years," says Guinane. Doing it yourself, you could end up spending half that.

If you're hiring a pro, ask for recommendations and check references. Better to pay a bit more for a quality job done versus one that falls apart before next spring.

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