

Outdoor dilemmas

BY MARY FRAN MCQUADE

Summer's winding down but there's plenty of time yet to enjoy it. In fact, this is a great time to step back and polish up your outdoor living area. Patio furniture and accessories are all very well, but you really need a good setting for your backyard living room. That means a beautiful, functional deck or patio.

Many people automatically think decks are the answer for outdoor living, but patios have a place, too. The decision depends on your personal preference, budget and outdoor accessibility to your house.

Deck or patio?

On the practical side, cost for a decent deck or patio is roughly the same, though special conditions and materials add up. Decks may need a bit more care, and you may have to make a special effort to provide privacy. As well, you should know that decks often need building permits, but patios do not. However, if your kitchen door is way up in the air—8 feet or more—a deck is the only realistic solution.

That's just some of what we learned when we spoke with Adam Gracey, of D.A. Gracey and Associates landscape designers in Concord. Gracey and his team have included hundreds of decks and patios in the landscapes they've constructed for homes across the GTA. Their work has won awards from industry group Landscape Ontario the past three years.

Homework first

Do your homework when planning a deck or patio, Gracey says. "How will you use the space? How do you entertain? Do you like formal or casual living? How many people will use it? What age are your kids?" All these things go into designing a successful outdoor living area.

In terms of style, anything goes. You may have heard outdoor spaces should match a house's style. That's true in front, Gracey says, but not in private backyards. You can have anything from an Old English garden with random flagstones or clay brick patio, to a modern deck with tempered glass and metal railings. Furniture, container plantings and flower beds/borders can all reflect your chosen style.

Unless a kitchen door far off the ground limits your choice to a deck, you can choose a deck, a patio, or even both. (Though if your kitchen is at ground level, installing a raised deck doesn't really serve any purpose.)

For example, you could combine cooking and conversation areas on a deck with a ground-level dining patio surrounded by a garden. "You have a more private and intimate feeling sitting in the garden, as opposed to sitting above the garden."

A stepped-down deck approach is attractive



Or the top section might be just a small barbecue area, dropping down a couple of feet to a larger lounging area, then two more steps down to the dining area at the lowest level. This stepped-down approach is more attractive than one long series of steps, easier for toting food and more manageable for older people.

Go big or go home

One thing that bugs Gracey is decks that are too small. He suggests a minimum size of 12 feet by 12 feet, which allows dining for six people. Go larger if you can. "You can fill it with furniture—a serving table or a couple more chairs." There are limits to deck size, though: check with city regulations.

A ground-level patio should extend 14 feet from the house's back wall, to allow for overhanging plants at the edge.

Gracey is big on composite wood for decking, because it's easy care—no staining necessary to keep it looking new. Rot-resistant treated wood is fine for structural parts that don't show. Natural cedar is lovely, but needs yearly upkeep to keep

from going grey.

Privacy on a high, exposed deck can be an issue—no one wants to relax up on a stage. Gracey suggests adding a 6- or 7-foot high privacy screen made of wood, perhaps with decorative inserts. "Sometimes we build in planters or benches with storage," he adds.

Range of choices

For patios, there's a wide range of choices: clay brick, interlocking concrete pavers, natural flagstones and granite slabs. Patio stones these days come in a dazzling array of shapes, colours and patterns. (Beware of paving that's too rough for small children to play on, and porous stones that show every stain.) Research availability, warranty, and cost to find the best choice—stoneyards can be fun!

Outdoor living today means anything from simple barbecues and pretty patios to complete outdoor kitchens with granite counters and built-in fridges, sinks and cooking areas. A well-designed deck or patio can mean years of enjoyment for your family and be a smart investment in your home. 