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As homeowners continue to spend more time in their gardens, landscape professionals may be able to cash in on a new trend — the outdoor kitchen.

by DAVID VAN ZELST



A number of events in recent years, such as the attacks on Sept. 11, have caused Americans to focus inward and look for new ways to spend quality time at home with family and friends. Recently, more and more people are swapping formal entertainment for casual get-togethers. What's more, renewed interest in gardening and creating a retreat from daytime stresses has encouraged homeowners to pay more attention to the back yard. These and other factors have fired up another up-and-coming trend for landscapers and their clients to sink their teeth into.

As a landscape architect and founder of my own company, Van Zelst Inc., Wadsworth, IL, I've always been devoted to creating beautiful, livable outdoor spaces. That, in combination with my love of cooking, has made offering fully appointed outdoor kitchens a natural extension of Van Zelst's core landscaping business.

When my family moved into a new home a few years ago, I began experimenting with the ultimate outdoor kitchen and entertaining space for our own back yard. Since then, I've added these same services to my company's offerings, and many of my clients have been eager to adopt what I've learned. By continuing to field-test new accessories, as well as hundreds of new recipes, I'm able to advise homeowners who are considering installing their own outdoor kitchens and dining suites.

If you're a landscape professional looking for a way to boost sales, the advent of the outdoor kitchen is a trend worth looking into, as it may help you cook up those extra profits.



When designing an outdoor kitchen, it's important to consider seating arrangements.



Outdoor kitchens are among the hottest trends in landscape development.

Know no bounds. Outdoor kitchens are proving to be true works of art and engineering, illustrating that the patio is no longer limited to just charcoal grills and folding chairs. Top-of-the-line kitchen equipment manufacturers have entered the marketplace with appliances and accessories specifically designed to stand up to harsh, unpredictable weather. In some cases, individual components — such as high-end gas grills — can range from \$2,500 to \$10,000, not including installation or extras. For affluent homeowners looking to enhance their surrounding's aesthetics and livability, money is no object.

Some experts have suggested a fully equipped outdoor kitchen is this decade's answer to the sailboats and sports cars of years past. As a prestigious addition to a homeowner's most visible investment, an outdoor kitchen should function as an extension of a home's interior. Those folks who are avid outdoor entertainers want a complete setup that keeps them at the center of the action. As a result, outdoor kitchens are now being built to include just about everything found in a traditional kitchen — and then some.

Endless options. As with more conventional patios, the grill is the mainstay of the outdoor kitchen. Today, however, a barbecue's sidekicks are a little more sophisticated than a portable cooler and umbrella. For savvy backyard chefs, refrigerators and ice makers keep condiments and bar needs close at hand, while integrated side burners allow the whole meal to be prepared and monitored without leaving the back yard.

Are the hamburgers done, but the steaks could use an extra minute — or 10? With these high-tech kitchens, those dishes that get done first can be kept in warming drawers that maintain a constant temperature, keeping food warm until it's time to serve. In addition, outdoor kitchens can include heavy-duty rotisseries, smoker systems and wood-fired ovens, all options homeowners are unlikely or unable to install indoors.

When my company designs an outdoor kitchen, the Van Zelst team begins by assessing the type of entertaining a client plans for the space. Will several adults be chopping, tossing and preparing food side by side? Does the homeowner's entertaining style lean more toward formal sit-down dinners or casual stand-up affairs? Does the client want everything on the patio so he or she won't have to return to the house once the cooking begins?

Broad questions such as these help us get a grasp on how the outdoor kitchen will be used, how much work space will be needed and what accessories should be included. Depending on how a client plans to use the space, amenities such as side burners, a sink or even an ice machine can be built into the design. Other considerations that need to be discussed during the initial planning stages are how the homeowner would like preparation space delineated, as well as how the serving and seating areas should be arranged. Traffic flow is key in determining an overall plan, especially if there will be children playing or guests swimming nearby.

For example, some clients decide they want to create complete preparation and entertainment areas, which allow the cook to remain at the center of the party. Others, however, are just looking for a simple place to grill for their family. Some homeowners are inspired by the alfresco approach to dining, which is so popular with southern French and Tuscan families — they want to enjoy as many big, communal meals outdoors as summer allows. A few will even take advantage of their grills year-round.

It's installation time. Of course, the setting for every grill and kitchen installation is different. While a few clients prefer a freestanding or charcoal grill, the trend is increasingly moving toward built-in gas models. As an example, my company has placed grills on tumbled Belgian stone, as well as on bluestone or flagstone, mounting the grill in a masonry frame to match the specific home and garden style, whether it's mid-American, French or Japanese.

For my own outdoor kitchen, I edged the patio with a millstone water fountain, shade trees and colorful perennial plantings that provide a dynamic view all season long. In addition, I planted a small herb garden just steps from the prep area, providing instant access to fresh basil, thyme, mint, tarragon,



Your clients can prepare entire meals without having to leave their decks.



Today's outdoor kitchens put everything at the homeowner's fingertips.

oregano — more than 12 varieties available in all. With a few snips, dishes are seasoned and garnished to perfection.

There are myriad other ways to explore what is possible when designing an outdoor kitchen — such as seeking advice from a locally renowned chef in your vicinity. In the Chicagoland area, where my company is located, I've even served as a hands-on observer in a few kitchens. By watching professionals at work and asking a lot of questions, I've been able to refine my company's designs to meet the needs of serious backyard chefs who prepare elaborate meals outdoors throughout all four of the city's distinctly different seasons.

Naturally, your local climate will guide you in how you design outdoor kitchens, as well as the material you choose for each project. In Chicago, for example, stainless steel grills and appliances are preferred, not just for their streamlined, contemporary look, but for their ability to stand up to the elements. Stone countertops and other weather-resistant materials are perfect for Chicago's hot, humid summers; freezing winters; and everything in between. What's more, in this locale, waterlines must be easy to disconnect to avoid freezing during winter.

Keeping it safe. As with building an indoor kitchen, safety, as well as usability, must be at the top of the priority list. The new wood-fired oven installed in my outdoor kitchen, for example, is based on a centuries-old concept of burning wood on a stone or masonry base, which then transfers the heat to the food being prepared. Cooking time is reduced to just minutes, and the results are unlike anything you can accomplish with a conventional oven.

However, our design includes some important modern improvements, such as built-in storage for the cherry and oak that fuel the oven and a dedicated ventilation stack. Just as important to making your client's outdoor kitchen a

dream come true is lighting. Task lighting is needed for the cooking and preparation areas, and unobtrusive ambient light works best for dining and entertainment spaces.

Knowing which lighting to use and where to find the masonry that will make your client's wood-fired oven the envy of all neighbors are important aspects of building an outdoor kitchen. But remember, whether it's a first-time client or a loyal customer, homeowners appreciate a one-stop shopping experience. At Van Zelst, we have employees who are experienced at installing masonry hardscape, as well as lighting systems and integrated kitchen facilities. By planning ahead and selecting a landscape designer who's equipped to handle every phase of the installation, clients are ensured electrical, gas and water sources are properly installed to complement one another, and the installation fits together aesthetically as well.

As a landscape architect, I'm thrilled about the trend toward creating complete outdoor suites that make a homeowner's outside space as livable and enjoyable as possible. By helping our clients create a consistent flow from indoors to out, and by incorporating all the accessories into an overall landscape plan, we can design a cohesive, visually appealing, fully functional environment that retains its beauty and appeal for years to come.

Here at Van Zelst, we just remind our clients to keep the snacks and margarita fixings on hand, because once their outdoor kitchen is complete, it's certain to become the center of family — and perhaps even neighborhood — life. Outdoor kitchens are here to stay, making it clear that for some landscape companies, this is a trend they can take to the bank.

David Van Zelst is founder and president of Van Zelst Inc., Wadsworth, IL, a landscape architecture company that offers complete design/build services. For more information, visit www.vanzelst.com, or call (847) 623-3580.