By Katie Navarra

Beyond Fire Pits and Pergolas

Create customized outdoor living spaces

Outdoor kitchens, fire pits and pergolas are buzzwords for residential landscape contractors.

Demand for these design features remains strong. In a survey conducted by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), which polled residential landscape architects about the estimated popularity of various design elements for 2014, 94.2% of respondents agreed gardens/landscaped spaces would be the hottest trend of the season; and 92% anticipated kitchens and entertainment spaces would also be in high demand.

While the results likely come as little surprise, the challenge for landscape contractors is to offer a blend of services that incorporates these features to create a customized living space that seamlessly transitions indoor amenities with the tranquility of the outdoors.

Entertainment systems

Outdoor living spaces have truly become an extension of one's home. Outdoor ranges, refrigerators and fire pits provide all of the comforts of the indoors, with the benefit of being outdoors. With a homeowner's interest in enjoying the conveniences of their homes while outside, it's only natural a television and/or sound system be incorporated into the design.

"A lot of people will put it (the television) by the BBQ, as it really allows them to get the most out of their backyard," said Corey Felter of Soundworks in Armonk, N.Y. "They can be outside, spend time with their family, and catch the game."

Designed to tolerate changing weather conditions, manufacturers have released televisions specifically designed for outdoor installation. New televisions designed specifically for outdoor use are heated and cooled to accommodate all weather conditions. "Some people think we can create a hook-up and they can move their TV from indoors to outdoors and back, but it's really not a good idea nor the ideal installation option," he added.

Whether used to enhance a TV's sound system or used to play tunes, an outdoor sound system sets the mood. Bulky, unsightly speakers are a thing of the past. Speakers are disguised as planters,

Photos on pages 22 and 23 by Melissa Napolitano.

flower pots or even installed directly in the ground. "People are straying away from box speakers outside of the house because they ruin the ambiance," said Felter.

A recent Soundworks project included in-ground speakers and subwoofer in a client's basketball court. "It sounds amazing near a sports court, and it brings life to a party," he added.

Using direct burial wire, much like a lighting system, the installation of an outdoor sound system is relatively simple. "You do have to take into account voltage and how long the wire runs are going to be," Felter explained. "The wire length and gauge will determine the amps."

Ideally, discuss the potential for an outdoor entertainment system with a client at the same time they are discussing a larger renovation project. "It's better if all the contractors on the project can work together so we're not installing wire after the sod has gone down, but there are always ways to make it happen even if you're not included from the beginning," he said.

A remote control system goes hand-in-hand with an entertainment system "A lot of people like to change the volume or change the station from their lounge chair with a tablet or phone," Felter explained. "A really good network signal is needed to do that." In some cases, a secondary Internet access point is needed outdoors for smooth operation.

A new twist on gardens

As the ASLA survey indicated, gardens and landscaped areas are one of the most commonly requested design features in residential properties. What's interesting for 2014 is the unique approach homeowners and designers are taking to gardens and landscaped areas.

With an increased focus on sustainability, gardens and landscapes that feature native plants, are sustainable, are easy to maintain and provide a source of fresh produce for the family are more prevalent. Sustainable landscapes cover a broad range of "themes" ranging from garden habitats to raised planting beds, keyhole gardens and rain gardens.

Garden habitats, often called backyard restorations, transition a planned landscape into an area brimming with native plant species. "Some are used to actually return more wildlife habitat or attract certain kinds of wildlife, like butterfly gardens," said Donny Duke of Engledow Group/Director of Litchfield Studio in central Indiana.

A garden habitat benefits wildlife by creating shelter and providing a source of food and water for native birds, bees, butterflies and other wildlife. "Others focus on lower maintenance native types of plant material, which give a more natural look," he added.

Property size and client expectations for landscapes are the most common challenges to creating a garden habitat. "The fact that most native plant materials best suited for many of these purposes is alien to most residential customers who are looking for more polished and full plant material," he said. "We have found some clients really enjoy the idea of this type of creation, but struggle to accept the more native plant species because they lack a more formal appearance."

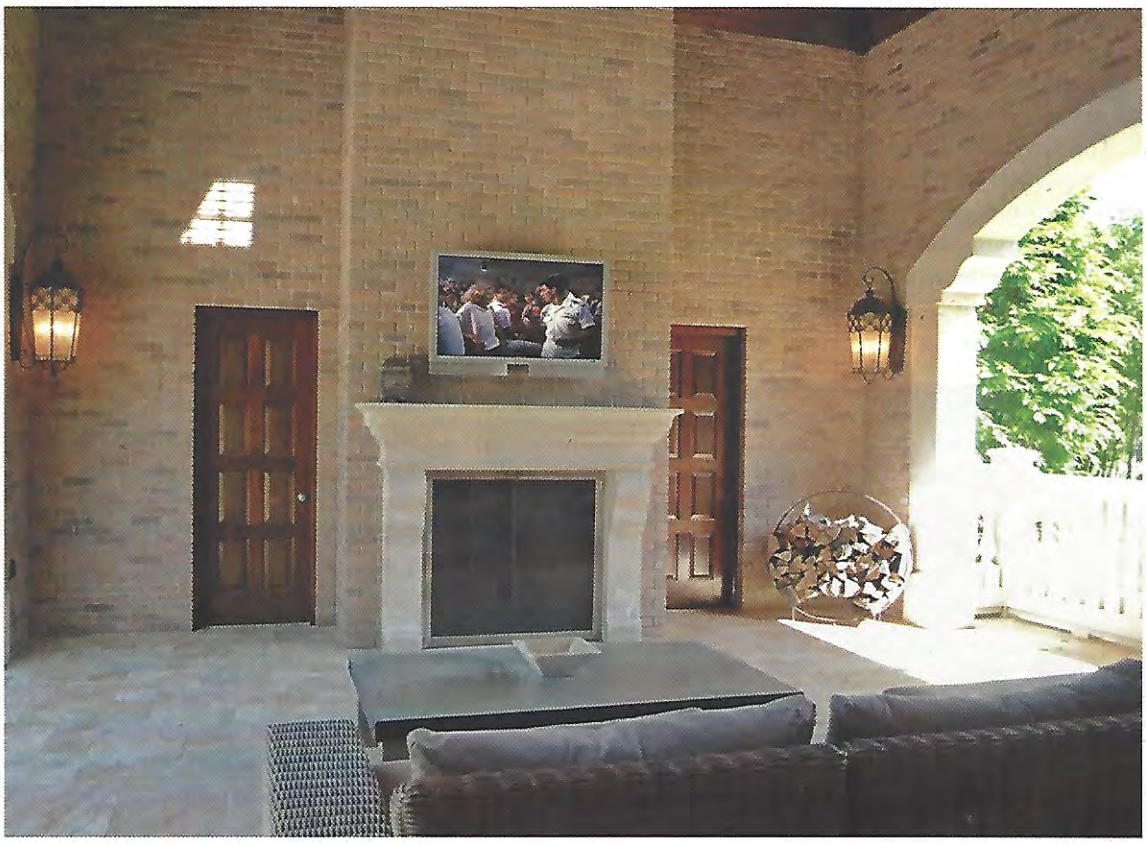

Photo by Melissa Napolitano

Keyhole gardens and other raised vegetable beds are also becoming more popular in the residential settings. "A keyhole garden combines the best attributes of a raised garden with a recycling center and a compost maker," Duke explained. "An overhead view of a keyhole garden looks like keyhole in a circular plot."

This "keyhole" allows the user easier access to the center area where it would be typical to deposit compostable scraps of vegetables and other green matter containing water. Micro-organisms go to work composting these greens and turn them into healthy soil. This composting ability of the garden and the fact that this style of gardening also requires less watering help make this a sustainable garden.

Photo provided by Engledow Group

Rain gardens are usually envisioned to be in the worst draining low spot of a property. "But when we want to plant these area we do want to replace the soil with some better draining soil media to help plants root better and to drain off excess storm water more quickly," he explained. "Our challenge here in the Midwest is having workable conditions on site. We average about one inch of rainfall per week, so having an area to be dry enough to access is often challenging."

While 2014's design trends are all about personalizing an outdoor living space to suit a client's personal preferences through entertainment systems and sustainable gardens, it's important to balance these design features with color and purposeful implementation.

More than ever, homeowners are craving outdoor living spaces that mirror their interior living areas. They will continue to look for new ways to enjoy the outdoors by bringing entertainment systems out of doors and incorporating color and sustainability into their landscapes.

With attentiveness to current trends and the customer's preferences the possibilities are endless.

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