

Chairish

[HOME](#) / [DECORATING GUIDES](#)

How To Transform Your Outdoor Spaces

This season, we're tossing out anything that doesn't inspire us: right now, we all deserve better than bad outdoor furniture and boring accents. To find out how to bring some spice to your backyard, patio, or wrap-around porch, we tracked down some of our favorite designers for advice on how to create chic and supremely unfussy exteriors. Get ready for color tips, space and climate solutions, and gorgeous ideas for summery accessories that will bring tons of character to all your outdoor areas.



Design by Valerie Grant Interiors | Photo by Peter Rymwid Photography

Start with the Environment

As with any kind of winning design, a sublime and functional outdoor space takes its initial inspiration from the surrounding environment design. For outdoor decoration, the exterior design also encompasses the architecture of the house; for example, outside a traditional cottage, avant-garde furnishings may fall flat. “The architecture sets the tone for what will work outdoors,” says Woody Argall, an experienced interior designer based in Los Angeles.

The landscaping helps define the character of a strong outdoor design too. “Working with someone who is a landscaping expert is crucial,” says Holly A. Kopman. Low-maintenance landscapes mean that the outdoor environment stays beautiful with relatively little effort. Wild gardens often pair with a bohemian-style design or offer contrast against a polished patio, while substantial hardscaping may require soft, natural elements, like plant life, to help create balance.

Designer Valerie Grant recommends texture, pattern, and materials like rattan and teak to offset harder materials such as bluestone and field stone. “Another key element to softening the harder surfaces is creating inset planting beds with trees and plants to bring in a natural element,” she says.

Chairish



Design by Mia Rao Design | Photo by Darris Harris

In the city, the situation is different. Townhouses with cramped yards rub shoulders with each other, limiting the amount of spaces that designers can work with to create a compelling environment design. “The key is to make every inch count with good space planning and storage,” says Mia Rao, a designer in Chicago. Even in the city, however, nature becomes a pressing concern; rather than working with nature, the goal is to “make it feel like you are surrounded by nature, even if you aren’t,” says Rao.

Chairish



Design by Amy Lau Design | Photo by Thomas Loof

Decide on the Relationship Between Interiors and Exteriors

Many top designers believe that the interior and exterior styles should match each other, or at least work together. “There should be an easy flow between indoor and outdoor living,” says Vani Sayeed of [Vani Sayeed Studios](#), a firm based in Boston. Colors can link both spaces, and doors serve as a threshold, creating the boundaries of each separate design, but when the doors open, the spaces need to belong to the same aesthetic vision or the transition can be

For [Amy Lau](#), founder of her eponymous company based in New York, the question is less about bringing the indoors out, and more about bringing the outdoors in. The best way to ensure cohesion of indoor and outdoor spaces is to bring a little of the outdoors inside,” says Lau. “For a beach house, that might be in the form of a powder room chandelier being made from shells, the living room rug having a border inspired by the lapping ocean, or photographs featuring the incredible outdoors.” Jamie Bush, founder of [Jamie Bush + Co.](#), also recommends working “from the outside in — it’s easier to select a great outdoor stone paving and bring that inside, rather than trying to force an indoor flooring material outside.”

Linda Hayslett of L.H.Designs links the importance of a relationship between the interiors and exteriors to the increasing popularity of open homes, with the decor of each room heavily influencing the rest of the house. “People are starting to live in homes with a more open layout and are marrying the outdoors with the indoors, so a lot can be translated to the indoors from the outdoors as well,” says Hayslett.

Chairish



Design by Holly A. Kopman Interior Design | Photo by Christopher Stark

Chairish

An open space means that boundaries matter less, enforcing the need for stylistic cohesion. However, when you do find a secluded separated from the general flow of the house, it's fun to experiment. In the space pictured above, the porch isn't visible from the inside of the house, so Kopman chose to experiment with a Moroccan style, which was not the theme of the house. "It makes a great surprise when you open the door," says Kopman.

If you want to try something different, the outdoors could be the perfect place to experiment. For those who need an easy trend to begin with, Grant recommends color. "Sometimes I am Color, along with eclectic furnishings, can inject whimsy into a space too, and outdoor spaces feel naturally more care-free, as they're less restricted by chores or obligations that characterize certain spaces like a kitchen. On a beautiful afternoon we crave a spot to lay out in the sunlight and drink a glass of chilled wine, or watch the sunset with a group of friends; formality doesn't matter as much when our purpose is, to an extent, to merge with an environment outside our control. "Our clients want to have a little more fun with the exterior, making it more playful," says Rao.

Argall notes that exterior design should not detract from the centrality of the landscape. "It was a challenge to create outside spaces that complemented rather than competed with the stunning setting," he says of the design featured below.

Risk or play, it's all about a marvelous attitude — and personality.

Chairish



Design by Woody Argall Design | Photo by Peter Vitale

Set up a Structure

As with interiors, the most delightful outdoor settings designate different areas for different functions. Structure here is key. “Ideally an outdoor space has some sort of architectural element that gives it structure — a pergola, sitting walls, raised planter, etc. — and this allows it to feel like an outdoor extension of the house,” says Tammy Randall Wood, founder of Interior Archaeology in Agoura Hills, California. “But structure can also be created with trees, large-scale pots, and planters filled with plants, and then furniture can fill in the footprint.” Rao

For Bush, hedges and landscape walls can create the intimacy necessary for an outdoor “room,” but that feeling can also be achieved through layering. “By just building the layers that you would normally find in an indoor space, such as rugs, side tables, accessories, potted plantings, upholstered furnishings, lamps, etc., you can create this environment without the confines of an actual room,” he says.

Chairish



Design by Amanda Teal Design | Photography by John Merkl

Section Out Areas

Once the structure is set up, the area can be divided into sections based on the needs of the client. Sayeed recommends at least a couple conversation areas. Small seating arrangements can serve as social spaces, as can a fire pit: “A fire pit not only adds visual interest to an outdoor space, but it’s also an entertaining place to gather with friends and family,” says Lau. If clients are introverted, preferring quiet mornings alone at daybreak to busy nighttime gatherings, different seating vignettes provide increased options for solitary activities, and for areas that provide a variety of different seating options allow people to sit in larger groups or perhaps break away for a more intimate conversation.”

Then comes the furniture. Practicality is important, as it’s difficult to enjoy yourself outside when you’re worrying about ruining your favorite pieces. “You want outdoor spaces to feel comfortable and inviting, but at the same time, you need to use furniture and fabrics that are durable and can withstand the elements,” says Grant.

Chairish



Design by Vani Sayeed Studio | Photography by Jared Kuzia

Luckily, nature-inspired materials are having a moment, so there are a number of luxurious, well-crafted outdoor furnishings on the market. When selecting outdoor furniture like porch tables, however, it's important to choose furnishings that are both beautiful and functional. "It's so easy to be distracted by how pretty something may look on your patio, but if it cannot withstand one summer, you'll be left disappointed," says Ollie Edwards, president of Business and Pleasure Co, a luxury outdoor furniture company based in Australia. Edwards suggests relying on materials that can withstand harsh sunlight, including teak woods and treated canvas.

Sayeed notes that not all high-performing fabrics or materials are appropriate for all types of weather. "In rain and moisture we look for product that is mold, mildew, rot, and rust resistant, and in dry environments we look for product that is resistant to fading and cracking, and does not retain heat," she says.

Chairish



Design by L.H.Designs | Photo by Christopher Lee Foto

Regulate the Climate

No one can really control the weather, but a few hacks can at least make our experience of our outdoor spaces more enjoyable. The landscape is a strong place to start. “Mixing plants with usable hardscaping is a good way to help with temperature control,” says Hayslett. “The greenery balances out the temperature on those hot days when they become lush.” Heat lamps, camouflage ceiling heaters, and gas fireplaces provide warmth on cooler evenings, while ceiling fans slice through the day’s heat. Sayeed, for her part, recommends fans, fire pits, and “delicious cocktails” to help beat bad weather.

Along with other designers, Teal crafts specific areas intended to combat heat. “Create at least one area that provides coverage from the sun,” she advises. Pergolas, gazebos, and sun sails offer shade, and are some of Rao’s favorite ways to design spaces of shade. When creating a pergola, Wood uses rolls of bamboo fencing to create shade across the roof.

Chairish



Design by Jamie Bush + Co.

Chairish

For colder weather, other accents like blankets can help offer warmth. “A simple hack for us is to get a bunch of Mexican serape-style yoga blankets (you can find some great ones online) and roll them up in a cute basket that can be used at the pool and at night,” says Chavez.

In the field of climate regulation, technology is constantly creating new opportunities. “We are experimenting with heated concrete benches in one of our Tahoe projects,” says Bush.

“Around a fire pit we are pouring custom concrete benches which will be heated, and that mass of material radiates a consistent warmth and tends to work well in cold climates.”

Chairish



Design by Chimera Interiors | Architecture by Tag Front | Photography by Will Edwards Photography

Light Up the Night

Many designers attest to the value of showstopping, nighttime lighting in an exterior design. We don't always notice the quality of light — of course, we notice light's absence — yet that appears out of the fog as you drive up a hill, and then recedes.

“Lighting is very important,” says Hayslett. “Once the sun goes down, there's no other light than the moonlight and stars, so thinking about lighting and hiding the cords will help make entertaining and hanging out in the space at night magical and fun.”

Candles, lanterns, and fairy lights provide a flawless finishing touch, in Rao's opinion, while Teal also suggests cafe lighting. In a backyard or patio, lighting has the power to create a memorable, romantic experience, but it's difficult to select lighting that lasts. “The reality is that UV, salt spray, humidity, and other corrosive factors can cause outdoor fixtures to fail in just a few months,” says Levi Wilson, founder and vice president of design at [Hammerton](#). “Make sure yours are pretreated and finished with coatings that are specifically formulated to withstand harsh climates.”

Accessories like outdoor rugs and hammocks enhance the luxury and intimacy of a well-designed outdoor area, while eye-catching elements like drapery can kick the design up a notch and offer shade on sunny days. “At the moment I am in love with sail shades,” says Teal. “They are available in great shapes and styles, and can add drama to an otherwise flat space.”

Chairish



Design by Interior Archaeology | Photo by Joe Schmelzer Treasurbite Studio, Inc.

“Design is about bringing people together, creating a sense of community, and helping people live their best lives,” Teal says. With a touch of finesse, an outdoor environment can enrich our lives, not only through communion with nature, but also through the magnificence of its design.