

## OUTDOOR LIVING

# Creating a backyard oasis

With elbow grease and ingenuity your yard can be turned into a retreat

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

No cottage? No problem. To get the most out of summer, you need look no further than your own backyard.

Whether your idea of backyard bliss is a deck, a patio or a lush garden and expanse of lawn, you can create an outdoor retreat where you can kick back with a cool drink and a book. Or fire up the barbecue and entertain friends and family if you prefer. Either way, you can skip the long traffic-clogged trek to cottage country — all you have to do to is step out the back door.

With elbow grease, ingenuity and yes, let's face it, a bit of cash, you can turn your backyard into a heavenly retreat. Here are some tips from the pros — Vancouver's Kelly Deck, host of HGTV's *Take It Outside* and Lorne Hancock, senior designer with Earth Inc., a Toronto landscape design company.

"Being able to enjoy the few months (of warm weather) that we do have is magical really," says Hancock. "Enjoying your own personal outdoor space, a glass of wine in hand, is quite wonderful."

Repeat frequently: "My backyard is a 'room.'"

"Think of it as an extension of your inside space," says Deck. What will you do in this "room?" Start by asking yourself how you want to spend your outdoor time and be realistic, says Deck. If your idea of backyard bliss is an escape from the madding crowd, surrounded by greenery, don't stick a big table in the middle of the space.

**Create a base of operations:** Just like an indoor room, you need to start with a "floor" or platform. Since grass tends to be high-maintenance, Deck suggests reducing the size of a grassy patch by putting in a stone patio. To keep costs down, Deck recommends a cobbled look



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"Treat your backyard like an extension of your inside space," says Kelly Deck, host of HGTV's *Take It Outside*.

that consists of concrete pavers inset with one or two pieces of sandstone or slate. For a deck, think cedar with a pressure-treated underpinning — "the posts and the parts you don't see," says Hancock. Be aware that if you opt to paint or stain your deck, "it creates maintenance issues," says Hancock, who suggests leaving it to weather to a beautiful light grey instead.

**Go green:** Plants and greenery, whether in pots and planters or planted in the ground, create the "walls" for your outdoor room.

Planters are the easiest way to create an instant garden but remember that plants in pots need to be watered a lot more frequently than do plants in the ground. Coconut mulch, available at any progressive garden store, will retain water and release it over three or four days.

Hancock recommends investing in an irrigation system. "Otherwise things just get fried."

**Consider screenery:** Whether wood, glass or metal or a combination, screens also provide a sense of enclosure, notes Hancock. Together with greenery, screens be used to

create different areas within your backyard room, making it look bigger and more interesting.

**Location, location, location:** If your outdoor space has south or west exposure, it can get really hot. "West exposure can really bake you, especially in the suburbs," says Hancock. Building an overhead arbour with either rampant or flowering vines, such as clematis or Virginia creeper, will provide shade and is a green alternative to the classic patio table umbrella.

**Buy quality outdoor furniture:** The cost of furnishing an outdoor room should be almost identical to the cost of furnishing one indoors, says Deck. "Buy for longevity, not for trends. The cheapest thing is not always the best because you'll just have to dispose of it in three years."

Even if your outdoor room is only 300 square feet, think of furnishing it with a sofa, two chairs and a coffee table. If your budget is limited, expand the length of time it takes you to completely furnish your outdoor space, suggests Deck. Use older furnishings in the meantime, she advises.

Furniture frames should be durable enough to stay outside. Furniture made with an anodized aluminum frame and polypropylene weave is extremely hard-wearing, notes Deck. And now high-end boat materials and airplane technology are being employed to create outdoor furnishings, making them even more durable.

**Shine a little light:** No matter how great your space, nothing kills the ambience faster than "a porch light shining in your eyes," says Hancock. "The right lighting makes all the difference in the world."

Candlelight works well and it's cheap and cheerful but make sure you get something covered, like a hurricane lamp, so you're not relighting the candles all night.

In addition, notes Deck, there are many eco-friendly lighting innovations that are also easy on the budget. Use lighting to create drama by picking a plant, tree or screen and uplighting it. "Even a regular old maple, if it is lit brightly at night creates an architectural element," says Hancock.

"It's all about mood."