

# Outdoor Living



# A Garden to Excite the Senses

Experience the outdoors more fully by creating a sensory experience in your own backyard.

Here are some ways to create a fully immersive experience.

## **SOUND: BUILD A WATER FEATURE**

Fountains, ponds, waterfalls and other water features provide a lot of benefits in the garden. They provide water for transient wildlife and can help reduce stress, mask urban or suburban noise, and provide a naturally cooling sound. Real Simple says the sound of running water can give an outdoor space a quiet, steady rhythm that makes any space feel more peaceful. It also serves to drown out neighbors' noise and traffic sounds.

Water features help cool the space around it as the water naturally evaporates. It can make your garden feel more fresh, especially on warm days. Moving water helps release negative ions that help clean the air around it.

## **TOUCH: PLANTS YOU CAN FEEL**

While a lot of plants out there don't like to be touched, there are some that practically beg for it.

Mimosa pudica, also called touch-me-not or shy plant, folds its leaves and droops



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when touched. Lamb's ear, or *Stachys byzantia*, is known for its soft, velvety leaves that resemble, you guessed it, lamb's ears. Geraniums, *Pelargonium tomentosum* have big, soft leaves that are covered with silky hairs. Blue fescue or dwarf pampas grass feature soft, springy leaves that run

through your fingers.

## **SMELL: SWEET SCENTS**

Of course, there are quite a few plants that perfume the air around the garden. Some of the most famous of these are roses, such as the grandiflora rose *Radiant Perfume*, featuring huge yellow blooms

with an intense citrus scent. Rose Hall of Fame member *Fragrant Cloud* is a classic red rose with a traditional, spicy rosy scent.

Another traditional garden scent is the gardenia, a member of the coffee family with a sweet scent and delicate blooms. Staying with shrubs,

sweet osmanthus or tea olive is a fragrant spring bloomer with a delicate floral fragrance that dominates the garden. In cooler climates, lilacs are a great, sweet-smelling shrub to add into the garden. Blooms are typically purple and prolific, but can be magenta, pink or white.

# Permeable Hardscapes

Hard surfaces such as concrete patios or decks can alter the way your yard soaks up rainwater.

Even though the resulting patios and outdoor spaces provide great places for entertaining, they can create damaging drainage patterns for you and your neighbors. One solution might be permeable hardscaping.

## WHAT IS PERMEABLE HARDSCAPING?

Permeable hardscaping uses specialized materials that build outdoor spaces with surfaces designed to allow water to drain directly through the surface into the ground, reducing damaging runoff and pollutants. Properly installed and maintained, these surfaces can prevent flooding, recharge groundwater and filter stormwater, reducing the environmental impact of hardscapes such as driveways and patios. Some types of permeable hardscaping include decomposed granite, flagstone slabs filled with permeable material such as sand, and permeable pavers.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT PERMEABLE HARDSCAPING

When picking a surface, it's important to choose the right hardscaping product for the application. They aren't usually suitable for high volume



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traffic areas, such as high-speed highways, but are great for patios, driveways, parking pads, sidewalks and garden pathways. Talk to your local garden center or home store about the right surface for your climate, area and application.

Bear in mind that permeable hardscaping may not be a solution in every area, such as those

with poorly draining soils.

## MAINTENANCE

The EPA says the most prevalent maintenance concern for permeable pavements is clogging. Fine particles can clog permeable pavements, but it generally doesn't lead to complete impermeability. Try vacuum sweeping areas that are no

longer as permeable or desired. Generally speaking, the agency says permeable surfaces need less maintenance for cracks or potholes than traditional pavement surfaces, but when they do occur, they can be patched. In a cold climate, porous surfaces can have lifespans of more than 30 years, even in colder climates with freeze-thaw stress.

Staying with cold areas, some permeable surfaces have more friction than conventional pavements and may not need as much deicing as those surfaces. However, shoveled or plowed ice and snow should not be stored on permeable surfaces, as the increased sediment loads of the melting winter precipitation can lead to clogging.

# Smart Irrigation Updates

After winter's chill, it's smart to spruce up irrigation systems before you start using them for spring planting.

The EPA says homes with clock timer-controlled irrigation systems use about 50% more than homes without irrigation systems, and that number can go up if it's programmed incorrectly or if the sprinkler system is improperly maintained. You could be losing as much as \$280 or 25,000 gallons of water over a six-month irrigation system. The agency says it's easy to get your irrigation system ready: Inspect, connect, direct and select.

## INSPECT

Running an irrigation system with broken or damaged sprinkler heads can cause overflowing and flooding and it can be hard to catch when systems run overnight or early in the morning. Walk through each zone of your irrigation system while it's running and look for heads that don't pop up fully or are tilted, sending water into the wrong areas. Flag broken sprinkler heads for work.

## CONNECT

Leaking joints can mean there's too much water pressure or particulates in the water. Check whether the

pressure regulator is properly installed. Look for leaks by checking irrigation areas between cycles, watching for water pooling on the surface that could mean an underground leak. Check connections inside the valve boxes that connections are secure and that the valves can shut. If the valves are unable to close completely, the system could

seep water.

## DIRECT

Watch where the spray from your irrigation system goes. Make sure it's not landing on the driveway, house or sidewalk instead of the yard. Adjust sprinkler heads to ensure each sprinkler head can reach the one next to it and that it provides uniform coverage to

avoid dry spots, and, of course, make sure they're pointing away from hard surfaces. Install spray sprinkler bodies with integrated pressure regulation to maintain consistent water pressure so nozzles can operate efficiently.

## SELECT

The EPA recommends you

choose a WaterSense-labeled irrigation controller that uses local weather data or monitors soil moisture to adjust your irrigation schedule. If you notice runoff when you run your irrigation system, consider breaking the irrigation time up into smaller intervals, called cycle-and-soak. That promotes deeper watering and root growth.



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# WFG: Work from Garden

Beautiful spring weather begs you to get out in it, but you may feel shackled to your home office.

With a few simple changes, you can make a work-from-home space in your garden that will reduce your stress and may even increase your productivity.

## FIND A SPOT

First, identify a spot that will give you ample shade (or sun!) depending on what you do for work. If you need a laptop, one option is to install an outdoor-compatible electrical receptacle.

You'll need a comfortable chair in an all-weather material and a table that's easy to care for in the elements. Make sure the table and chair heights are comfortable for you to work at for a long period.

Consider using an adjustable patio umbrella that you can move with the sun.

If you have frequent on-camera meetings, ensure what's behind you is camera-ready and that the lighting is

bright enough to easily see your face. Consider a backdrop of flowering container-friendly plants or a clean, crisp wall.

Avoid windows, wind chimes and other bright or noisy items.

Set up out of the wind for when you unmute. If your garden has a lot of traffic or neighborhood sounds, consider installing a water feature, movable green walls or other features to dampen the sound. One easy and quick way to dampen sound is to put down an outdoor appropriate rug and hang trailing plants to help absorb sound.

## WIFI EXTENDERS

Depending on your internet coverage, you may need to look into WiFi extenders to bring the indoors fully out. Look for an extender that is weather resistant, with at least an IP65 rating, with high-gain antennas and high-speed WiFi 6 or 7 capabilities. Outdoor units usually use power over Ethernet, meaning you just have to run one cable to both power the device and provide data, which can make installation a snap. Lastly, make sure your extender's range will fit your outdoor needs. Know how far your workspace is from the signal before you head to the store.

# Building a Pet-Friendly Garden

The back yard isn't just your slice of the great outdoors. It's also your pet's playground.

Make it more inviting with features designed just for Fluffy or Fido to explore.

## BUILD A CATIO

Catios are enclosed species that allow your feline friend to experience the great outdoors without experiencing the local wildlife. Look for a good catio spot near the house with access through a window, door or cat tunnel so Fluffy can enter freely. Make sure you can get in there to clean it up. The site should offer both sun and shade and be roofed to protect from the elements.

Enclose the catio using galvanized welded wire and don't use chicken wire; it's too weak to keep Fluffy safe. For flooring, use the existing ground or cover it with artificial turf or pavers. Add shelves, ramps, platforms, climbing trees and other features for your cat to explore. You can add cat-safe plants, scratchers, toys and more.

## PLANT A DOG-FRIENDLY GARDEN

Choose plants that are safe for dogs, such as sunflowers, snapdragons and marigolds. Stay away from toxic plants, such as daffodils, azaleas, English ivy, rhododendrons and more. The American Society



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for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has a list of toxic plants on its website. Also be aware of plants that grow wild that may be toxic to pets. Look out for plants with thorns and those that drop large sticks or cones and remove them from the area.

Also be aware of mulch. While mulch can help suppress weeds and retain water, some mulch contains cocoa —the same ingredient that makes chocolate toxic to dogs — and dyes that can harm pets. Instead of cocoa mulch, choose undyed wood chips. Fertilizers

and pesticides can be used in a pet-friendly garden, as long as they are used and stored properly to keep your critters safe. Some safer alternatives are worm castings or fish-based fertilizers and some horticultural oils.

If you've got a digger, include

a dig pit where dogs can do what comes naturally without destroying your garden. Fill the pit with sand and bury toys or treats just under the surface. Praise your pet for digging there to train them to dig only there. Provide a spot for them to get shade and clean water.

# Wildfires and Your Garden

Wildfires burned more than 5 million acres in the U.S. last year, the National Interagency Fire Center says. Your garden, if planned and maintained properly, can help keep your home safe.

Use your landscaping to create an area of defensible space to break up the continuity of the plants, which can fuel fires.

The space should extend out from your house by at least 30 feet and be filled with plants that are low in flammability, if any at all.

## **FIREWISE PLANTS**

The University of Florida recommends using plants with thick, succulent leaves. It recommends agave, aloe, azaleas, viburnum, hydrangea, oleander, philodendron, beautyberry, camellia, century plant, coontie, anise, Indian hawthorn and oakleaf hydrangea. Trees should have large, flat leaves. Think oak, maple and hickory instead of pines. However, remember, all plants will burn if a fire is severe enough.

UF says most wildfires spread horizontally through materials on or close to the ground.

However, shrubs and vines



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can act as ladders that help flames climb to the treetops. Keep trees pruned at least 10 feet off the ground. Keep tall trees away from the home and use shorter shrubs as foundation plantings.

Groups of plants should be separated by nonflammable areas, such as pathways or gravel.

## **KEEP UP WITH MAINTENANCE**

Once your firewise landscaping is installed and healthy, keep it up with routine pruning and irrigation work. Remove dead leaves, branches and plants often. Make sure irrigation systems are in good working order and that plants are pruned away

from the home. If you can, remove any heavy leaf litter accumulations in any adjacent wildland areas. Take all garden litter to an approved landfill; don't let it pile up on site.

Regularly remove firewood or other combustible materials from around buildings, including outbuildings. Make sure all parts of your property

can be reached by firefighters in case of a wildfire. Cooperate with your neighbors to provide plenty of access and large defensible spaces, even adjoining your defensible spaces if your properties are close enough. Work with your neighbors on maintenance issues, too, so that everyone can stay safe.

# Renting? Spruce Up the Patio

A lot of patio projects look awfully permanent and not rental friendly. However, there are plenty of things you can do to put your own touches on a rented deck or patio.

## ADD DECOR

Spruce up any existing patio furniture with your own all-weather cushions in a pattern or color that suits your taste. Keep those looking vibrant by regularly brushing off debris and spot-cleaning any spills promptly with mild soap and water. Use a UV-resistant spray and cover the furniture during the off-season.

You can use an outdoor-appropriate area rug to cover surfaces that aren't to your liking. Instead of planting in the ground, choose container-friendly varieties and arrange them in aesthetic groupings. Even fruits and vegetables have container-friendly varieties, depending on your gardening zone. Head to your local garden center to find some perfect for your area.

## ADD A WATER FEATURE

A water feature can be a calming, cooling part of your outdoor space. But it doesn't have to be permanent or elaborate. It can be as simple as a plug-in fountain to liven up a porch or patio. Make sure it's



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up to a permanent place in the great outdoors, plug it into a safe receptacle, and keep it clean and filled. You might choose a shady spot to prevent having to fill it so often.

## ADD A SLAT WALL

If you're tired of looking at an

old fence, install a slat wall over it. Build a frame the size of the fence you want to cover and space out thin slats for a clean, modern look. Once assembled and painted or sealed, screw them into the existing fence for a perfect cover. When it's time to move out, unscrew the

panels and off you go. Top your slat wall with swags of outdoor lighting for a bright, cheerful space.

## BALCONIES

If your rental unit has a balcony instead of a patio or deck, spruce it up with flower boxes

and hanging planters. Vertical gardens or trellises are a great way to add some privacy, or you can hang some gauzy curtains for a softer, more romantic ambiance. Check with your landlord to make sure it's OK to hang up anything before you get out the screws.