

Way to Grow in Orinda

Find Room to Grow – Outdoors

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If you're feeling cramped indoors, why not expand your living space to the great outdoors? An outdoor room will give you and your family more space at a fraction of the cost of an indoor addition. It will also encourage your whole family to get out and stay out.

You may think the "outdoor room" is a new concept, but it's actually existed for thousands of years, particularly in Europe. Historically, most Roman farmhouses and villas had courtyards. In Spain and Latin America, the courtyard was often built in the center of the home with the indoor rooms surrounding it.

An outdoor room adds more than just square footage to your home; it becomes a connection or bridge from the indoors to the great outdoors. As our lives grow increasingly busier and more stressful, this connection with nature and the outdoors becomes even more vital by providing a natural place to unwind and de-stress.

Why is it then, that we spend so much time planning the design of our indoor space, and fail to consider the design of our outdoor space as well? A well designed outdoor room can be achieved quite easily with a little foresight and planning.

Outdoor rooms are free of many of the constraints and challenges of interior decorating. For example, there's no need to design in windows or skylights for a view or extra lighting, and the floors don't have to end at walls. Outdoor room design however, is not without its own challenges. One obstacle we face often is convincing the homeowner that their main patio doesn't have to be right up against or even parallel to their house. Providing the right amount of shade can also propose a challenge. You may enjoy the open feeling of the sky for your ceiling; however, you'll also need enough shade for a comfortable space in the heat of the summer.

Outdoor rooms can be designed to be the main view from inside your home drawing people out to enjoy it. Or, it can be a hidden respite, a place to have some

quiet, alone time. Similar to interior decorating, outdoor rooms give people an opportunity to express their personal sense of style. Moods can be expressed through the use of color, and texture in both hardscape and plant materials. Art collections or found treasures can add flare and points of interest to your outdoor room.

The location of your outdoor room and its proximity to your home depends largely on the room's primary purpose. It's also very important to take into account the following four fundamentals, wind, light, view and privacy. If your entertaining guest list often includes many generations, you may want to provide a separate kids' space somewhat removed from the area where the adults will congregate.

Kitchens and dining spaces are among the most popular outdoor room additions. More and more cooking and entertaining products are being manufactured for outdoor use such as smokers, pizza ovens, warming draws, ice maker, wine coolers and so on. We've even installed an outdoor dishwasher. This is not as lazy as it sounds since this client's backyard and indoor kitchen were separated by three

flights of stairs.

From a landscape designer/contractors point of view, one of the best outdoor kitchen and room products now available is the OLP building block. These 1.5" thick reinforced concrete blocks can be used to form the structure of your built-in grill, counter tops, bar seating, benches and even fireplaces. Prior to this product being available it could take weeks to build a concrete block or steel framed island. The advantage of the OLP blocks is they can be laid out in a few hours, but what we really love about this product is that now we can walk the homeowner through where each appliance and counter space will be before they become permanent.

Another recent product development that adds an indoor feel to the outdoor room is the expansion of outdoor fabrics such as Sunbrella and other weather resistant brands. These fabrics, which were originally used solely for shade umbrellas and awnings, can now be found in cushions, accent pillows, curtain panels and even some very cool rugs.

In Orinda, warm summer evenings are not all that common so adding a source of warmth to your outdoor room will ensure it gets used more often. Fire pits and fireplaces are a great gathering spot offering warmth, mesmerizing visuals, and a place to achieve lifetime memories of S'mores and Jiffy-pop. Modern fire pits can be filled with colored (fire resistant) glass and many different types of rock. There are also some very real looking artificial logs that can be lit with the flip of a switch giving you that authentic fire glow without



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Increase your living space with an outdoor room.

the hassle or pollution of a real wood fire. Gas rings of fire can even be combined into a water feature for a very dramatic effect.

To further define an outdoor space as a “room,” you may want to consider adding an arbor, pergola or solid overhead structure. In addition to defining your space, these structures will provide shade and a convenient place to mount lights, heaters, speakers or even fade resistant curtains panels which will give the space a more intimate feel. Umbrellas and shade sails are another effective way to add shade while keeping your space open and less defined.

For questions on this article or suggestions for a future “Way to Grow” topic, please email us at office@gardenlight-landscape.com.