

Spring

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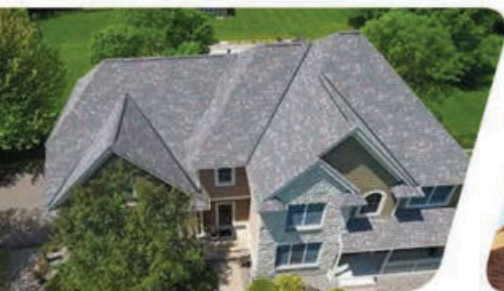
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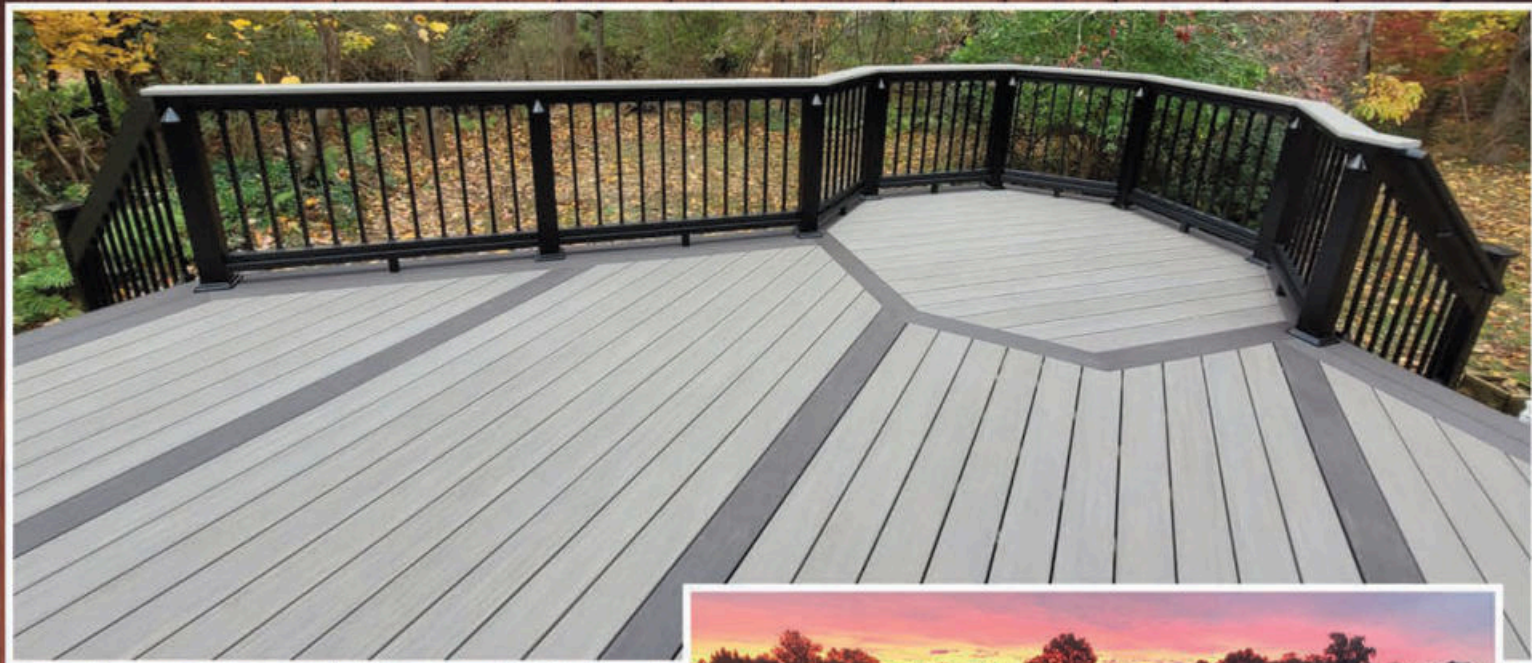
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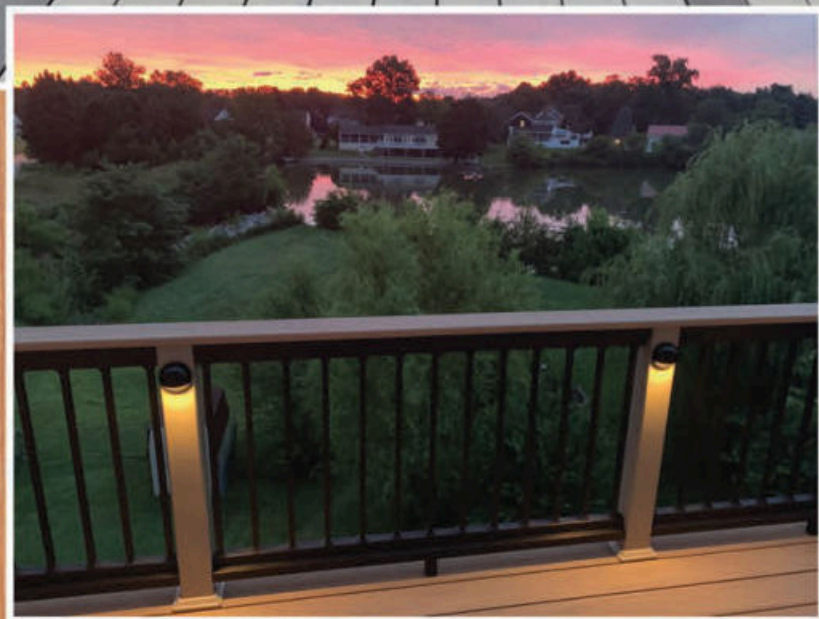
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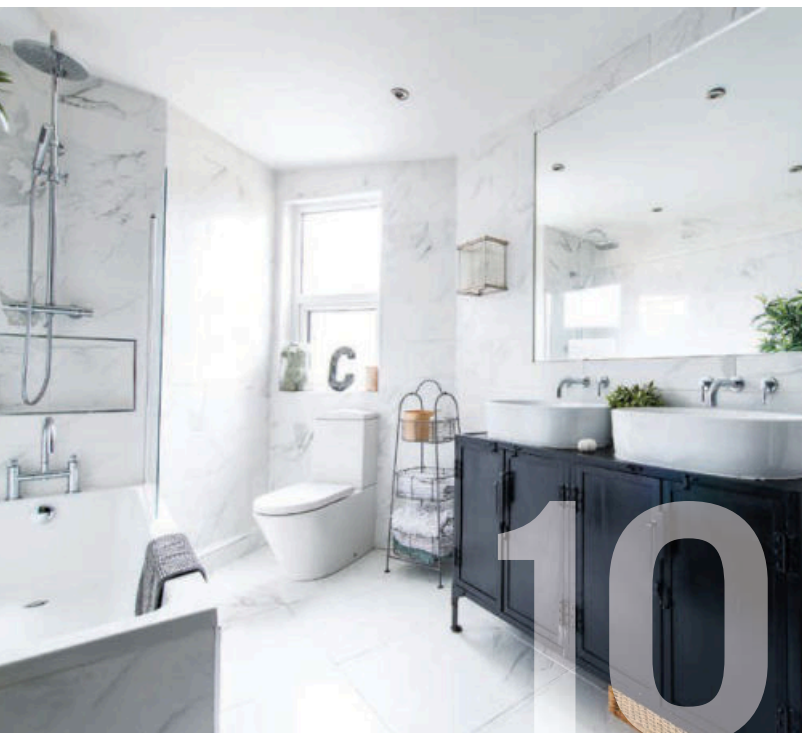
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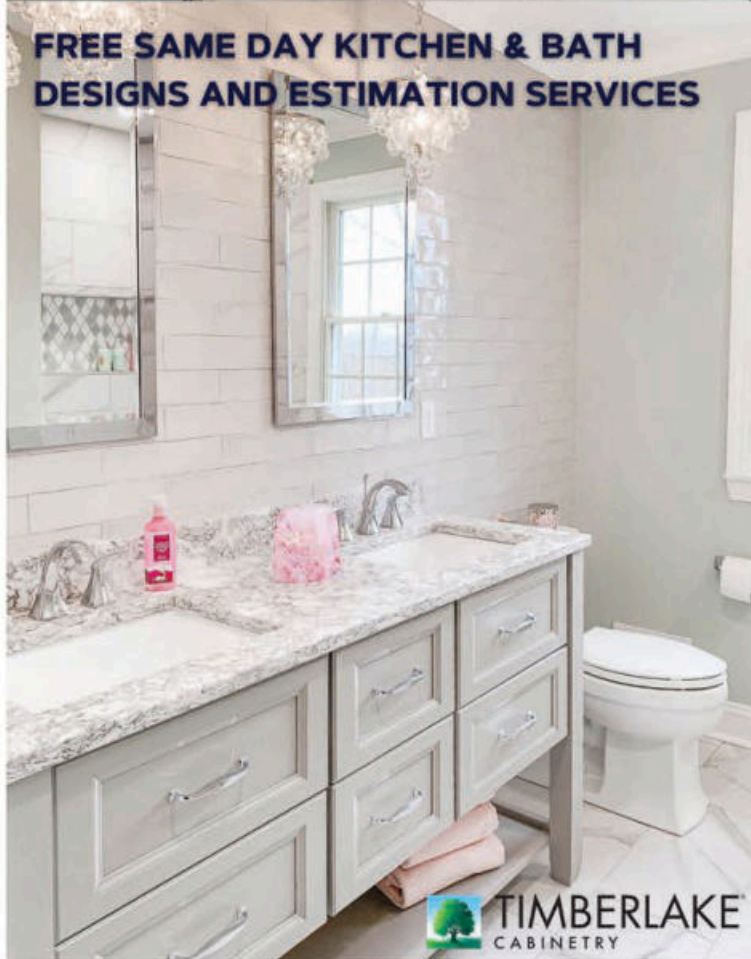
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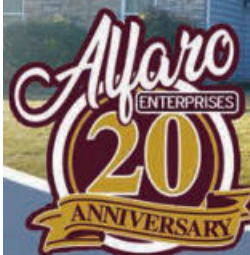
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Archadeck of Delaware

combines the personal attention of a local owner with the backing of a national brand to give area residents the outdoor living space of their dreams.

by **Matt Cosentino**

As a young man working in his family's hardware store, Dave Lyons discovered that he had an interest in—and a talent for—designing and building backyard decks. Starting with his own house, he finished a handful of jobs in his spare time, eventually working up to complete outdoor living spaces that included a deck, a patio and additional amenities.

While it didn't occur to him right away that he should turn his hobby into a career, the proud feeling he had never went away.

"It was gratifying to go from nothing, do the drawing, get the permit and build the deck—basically to do the whole thing from soup to nuts," Lyons says. "To me it felt like a big accomplishment to get that done, considering it wasn't even my profession at that point."

Of course, Lyons was no stranger to the industry, having grown up around the business as the son of a general contractor. From a young age he helped his father remodel rooms, build additions and yes, work on decks. Years later, he was employed by another company as the lead project manager responsible for \$20 million worth of residential construction when he finally decided to go out on his own.

It was no surprise that his first inclination was to focus his new company on decks. He had previously researched Archadeck and was intrigued by its reputation as one of the leading manufacturers of outdoor living spaces in the country since 1980. Lyons was inspired to become the franchise owner of Archadeck of Delaware, combining his own experience in the field with the support of a national brand and bringing that knowledge to residents in his home state.

"The nice part about it for the customer is I feel you get the best of both worlds," he says. "You get a small, local owner who is easily accessible and available to help with any issues. At the same time, you always get the advantages of being backed by a large company. Because of the relationship with Archadeck, I have buying advantages, I have an engineering department and I have a lot of resources that most small, local companies are not going to have.

Best of Both Worlds

It's a big help to me and the customer."

Archadeck has franchises throughout the United States and Canada and has built over 100,000 projects worldwide. Lyons recently attended a conference for the company where he was able to participate in seminars, learn about new products coming to the market and discuss best practices with other owners. "It's very beneficial and it's nice to know you're not the only one dealing with a particular problem," he says.

For the third year in a row, Archadeck of Delaware won a national service award at the conference, as it was recognized for ranking in the top 10% of the company based on reviews. The achievement speaks to Lyons' commitment to providing a positive experience for his customers, starting with the initial meeting.

He aims to get to know the customers on a personal basis and find out exactly how they will be using the outdoor space, which enables him to fulfill their wishes. He asks questions about their lifestyle, the size of their families, their cooking habits, etc. "We can build whatever deck you want, but if it doesn't fit your functionality, a couple of months in you're not going to be happy with it," he says. "My job is to be able to design you something that you're going to love, fits your functionality and fits your budget."

Lyons has seen a trend toward deck/patio combinations or even a deck that complements a covered porch. Most of his designs feature a shade element and may include an outdoor kitchen and fire pit. "I get the more complicated, custom projects that your everyday carpenter is not necessarily going to want to handle."

He is always researching the latest products available and soon hopes to offer steel framing to his customers. Because of the rising costs of wood, the price tag will only be slightly higher but the end result will be a better, more durable deck.

Lyons advises potential customers to meet with multiple contractors if they wish, and encourages them to speak to former clients of his to learn about their experience. No matter who they choose, the decision must come soon if they hope to have their new deck by the end of this summer.

"It's almost getting too late," he says. "If I come out to talk to you tomorrow, it's probably going to be July or August before we can start building. A lot of people have already signed contracts, but also permitting is getting to be a bigger problem and materials are becoming a bigger problem. You'll still get some use out of it in late summer and fall, but sooner than later you need to make the decision."

Those who do end up selecting Archadeck of Delaware will surely be pleased with a company that provides the finest craftsmanship with an honest approach.

"One of the things I strive for is to put the customer first," Lyons says. "I need the customer to be happy—that's what is most important to me. Profit is nice, but I really want the customer to be satisfied with their project." **H&H**

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ALWAYS IN

While some industries ebb and flow with the seasons, **kitchen and bathroom remodels** remain a leading area of home improvement all year long.



DEMAND

BY
MATT
COSENTINO

When the ground is frozen and snow is in the forecast every other week, it makes it difficult for contractors to be building an outdoor living space or working on a pool installation. Conversely, the middle of summer isn't an ideal time to be replacing a roof given the extreme temperatures. Certain industries inevitably have their down times throughout the year, but there are two particular home improvement projects that never seem to come to a halt: kitchen and bathroom renovations.

"We dip down a little bit during the holiday season, typically mid-December to mid-January, but this year that dip was just around Christmas—it picked right back up in the new year," says Linda Fennessy of Kitchen Magic. "We've been seeing it continuously. We have a lot of work and our backlog is as big as it's ever been. The orders are there and we're working to get them installed as quickly as possible."

Increased time at home as a result of the pandemic has led to even more remodeling than normal, and kitchens and baths have lived up to their reputation as the most popular rooms to refresh.

"Now more than ever, kitchens and bathrooms ... are a large part of our business," says Vic Fiore of Magnolia Home Remodeling Group. "It's a 12-month, steady flow of people looking to get prices, ideas and consultations."

The planning phase remains crucial to the process, and an experienced firm can assist greatly in setting the budget and expectations. *House & Home* spoke to several local professionals to get their tips and find out what trends to look for in 2022.

DEVISING A PLAN

Homeowners taking the leap to renovate a kitchen or bathroom have plenty of options, but finding a company that provides both design and construction services can make life a lot easier. That is especially true when it comes to a complete makeover of the space.

"A major kitchen remodel is not a straight A to B path," says David Cerami of HomeTech Renovations. "You need a plan and someone who can integrate everything into a fluid design and help you personalize it."

Sophia Amiano of Amiano & Son Design-Build believes education is an important part of the initial meeting with a customer. The average homeowner is not aware, for example, of the expenses involved when compiling a wish list for their new kitchen or master bathroom.

"Everybody goes into a project already having an amount in mind," she says. "We show them what we can do for the project and the work scope within that investment amount. We simply inform them on the market, on certain product costs, maybe how we can help keep costs down, just so that they're getting more realistic information. Sometimes Google can be very inaccurate and that will be a homeowner's first go-to when looking for information."

Fiore's first priority when meeting with a client is establishing a framework for pricing, which of course will ultimately be dependent upon their material selections. He also gets to know the customer's vision for the space.

"We always ask people what their needs and wants are, if they have any inspiration, pictures or examples of things they know they want or don't want," he says. "We put together a plan taking into account their feedback but also really what we think will work best. Then we work with the homeowner to fine-tune the plan, make sure it's their own and what they want."

"[The first appointment is] basically a fact-finding meeting," Fennessy adds. "We ask how they use the kitchen, are there multiple cooks, how big is their family, do they find it functional, what are the challenges, do they like the color, how long have they been in the home and how long do they plan on staying. Then we make our solutions



Photo courtesy of Amiano & Son Design-Build

based on their budget. We have them pick colors and styles and give them a price quote.”

Amiano wonders how any project could get accomplished without detailed planning in place. Her family’s company follows long-held procedures for every job, to help prevent hidden costs or anticipate issues that may arise.

“The reason we’ve built our process to the way we have over the years is for that exact reason, because if you don’t properly plan and put a project together from the get-go before jumping into construction, hiccups are bound to happen,” she says. “Construction is already a process as it is and it’s never 100% perfect, no matter how much upfront legwork you do, especially in today’s day and age when you have delays. If we didn’t do all that work in the beginning, I don’t even know how you would get a project together.

“We pick out all the materials up front, we design the space as close to the measurements as we can get, we even do an onsite visit prior to signing the contract just to verify those measurements and that the layout is going to work properly. ... We take pride as a company that we do those steps and we really limit those hidden costs that can happen in construction.”

BUILDING THE DREAM KITCHEN

One of the most important decisions in a kitchen remodel centers on cabinetry. White kitchens have been popular for years and although color has been introduced more lately, Fennessy does not anticipate white going away.

“I opened up a Houzz 2022 report [recently] and it definitely mimicked what we’re seeing: People are still choosing our whites—antique white, frosty white and satin white—and those are our most popular colors,” she says. “While I hear the woods are coming back, I don’t see it yet, only in our older demographics. Flat color is popular; we do sell a lot of colonial blue. Gray is second and we’ve just added a moss green to our offering, and that is by customer demand. Our in-house designer said we absolutely had to add it to our offering because it’s everywhere and it’s going to be very popular. But whites are still king.”

Amiano saw a great push for colored cabinetry in 2021, particular-

ly in the blue family. But the trend has not lasted long, at least with her clients.

“In this new year with all of the jobs we have coming in, we have a lot of people who want natural elements,” she says. “I’ve done some research on it and that’s where they’re predicting everything to go. In the last couple of years more people have been working from home and they’ve been in the house more, so people want that natural and organic feel. I have people who want wood tones and soft gray cabinets, and natural or sage colors for the wall. I see it falling more in that direction than going too bold with color.”

Color can be used in a way where it does not dominate the entire room, however.

“We’re doing color for islands,” Fiore says. “Some people will do the perimeter in one color and the island in another, or they’ll do different colors for the upper and lower [cabinets], which is becoming more popular. ... We’re also doing a lot of open shelving. Is it here to stay? I don’t know, but you can incorporate open shelving into a traditional design and it works nicely. It breaks up a wall of all cabinets.”

Amiano suggests that stacked cabinetry can have the same effect. “Maybe you have a 36-inch cabinet on the bottom with a 12-inch cabinet on top. It looks super elegant,” she says. “A lot of people will make the top cabinet glass for a decorative design feature; I’ve had quite a few kitchens where we’ve done that.”

For those looking to keep costs down, Cerami and Fennessy agree there are many benefits to cabinet refacing. “We’ve really seen an uptick in that,” Fennessy says. “They’ll reface it because they’re sick of looking at their outdated kitchen, and refacing offers a cost savings as well as quick transformation in color and style.”

Five to 10 years ago, granite was the hot word when it came to kitchen countertops, but quartz has replaced it as the go-to material. “It’s mostly all quartz [because of] maintenance and consistency,” Fiore says. “If you have veining, it’s a consistent look, whereas granite has a lot more variation. You can get the look of a natural stone and it’s amazing. The options out there are incredible.”

Another kitchen trend is to create a statement with the backsplash, compared to the past when it was used more to complement other elements in the room.

“We used to sell subway tile all day long in the ceramic, but people are asking for more elaborate styles and patterns,” Fennessy says. “So we’re adding lantern and octagon and geometric shapes. People are getting the lighter quartz countertops, the whites, so they’re not as busy and it’s the backsplash that is the star of the remodel. ... You can introduce color, you can do busy patterns. It’s eye-level and people want to make it the showstopper.”

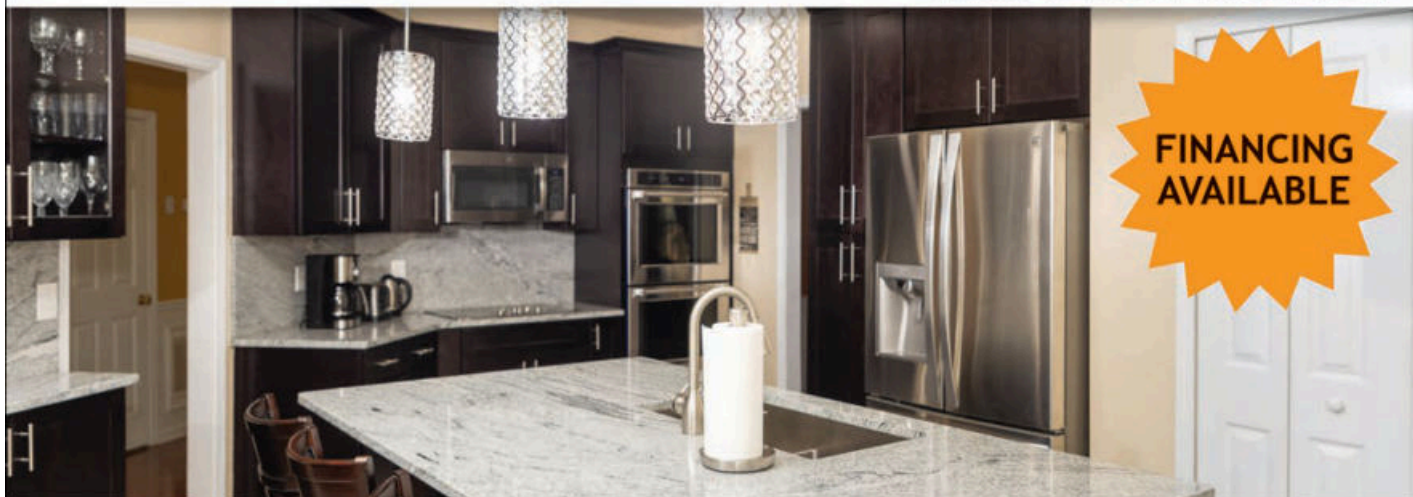
A SPA-LIKE RETREAT

For some time now, many homeowners have looked to recreate the feel of a spa or luxury hotel in their master bathroom. For Cerami, that usually starts with removing the large, builder’s-grade tub that is rarely utilized and using that space for the shower instead.

“The No. 1 request we get is to increase the size of the shower and the functionality of the shower,” he says. “Why wouldn’t you want a shower that is more like a spa experience? It can have a rain showerhead, a handheld showerhead, body sprays or room to sit down. People want more of that human car wash experience with beautiful tile surrounds, a space that is



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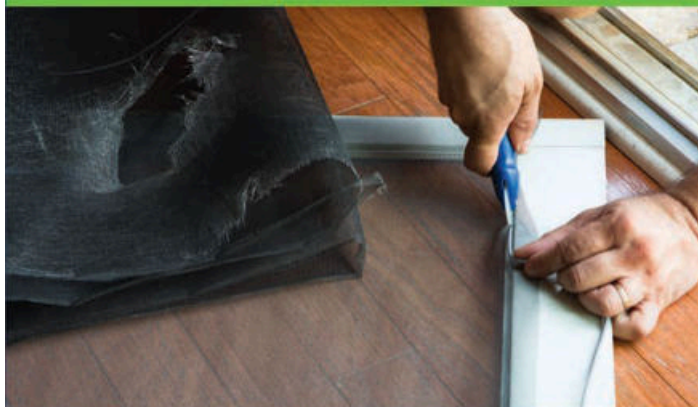
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Fiore is getting the same request from his customers, along with oversized vanities and heated floors. Cerami adds that those who still want a tub can opt for a freestanding one that is almost like a piece of art and has visual appeal. To that end, Amiano recently designed a master bath that certainly stands out.

“We just did a project where we actually incorporated the tub into the shower, so it’s a drop-in tub in the shower,” she says. “We did granite at the top to coordinate with the granite on the vanity top, and it looks really neat. I also do a lot of the freestanding tubs. Most people if they can fit it still want a tub, but the idea is to make a bigger shower so it’s like a hotel or luxury feel to it.”

She adds that no-entry showers are also in demand, especially for older homeowners who want to ensure safety without having to step over a curb. Linen cabinets within the bathroom are popular as well, so that towels can be accessible without walking down the hall.

THE FINAL WORD

Renovating a kitchen or bathroom is a major project and homeowners should know what to expect when beginning one. But with the right plan and team of professionals in their corner, the end result can be life changing.

“Understand that they are probably the two more costly projects to get involved with, especially if you’re going to go all in, meaning you’re going to strip the room and upgrade the plumbing, electrical, insulation, drywall and then start your finishes,” Fiore advises. “But if it’s done right, there is a return on your investment, not only in terms of house value but enjoyment and day-to-day use. The mistake that some people make is not setting a sufficient budget and not being 100% satisfied with the finished product. You really need to have a budget that is realistic in terms of the space and what needs to be done.

“You might want to wait until you can properly budget for a whole room renovation. You can minimize your cost and just do a little facelift until your budget allows for the full gut. You don’t want to spend too much and you don’t want to spend too little. We try to find a good balance of budget and scope, and you also have to take into account how many years you plan on living in the house and what your long-term goals are. Not everybody needs a custom gourmet kitchen with \$50,000 appliances. Everyone has to make sure they’re comfortable with the entire scope, budget and material selection.” **H&H**

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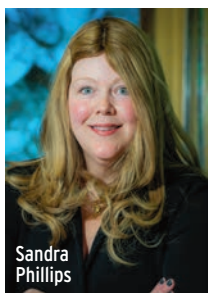
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Leaving No Stone Unturned

by Liz Hunter



Sandra Phillips

Combining high-quality products with exquisite design sense, Colonial Marble & Granite brings your whole home together.

"This past year has been such an adventure." This is the sentiment shared by Sandra Phillips, senior vice president of marketing sales and design, at Colonial Marble & Granite. One year into her tenure with the well-known company, Phillips is proud to be part of the next phase of Colonial Marble & Granite's expanded offerings. "We're bringing in so many products that

the Philadelphia market has never before seen," she says.

Recognized as this area's leading supplier of high-quality stone, Colonial Marble & Granite has spread its wings in recent years, reaching into other products that surround the kitchen and bath environment such as unique tiles, fixtures and integrated smart home products from the smart home services Colonial already offers. Customer demand made it even more evident that the company was needed for full-scale kitchen and bath design, and Phillips was brought on board to build out these offerings.

Boasting an interior design resume spanning more than 16 years, Phillips worked in high-end residential and commercial design in Manhattan with experience in running design teams and projects at well-known architecture firms and boutique-style interior design firms. "In meeting with Nikos [Papadopoulos, president of Colonial Marble & Granite], he was looking to take the company's design services to the next level with building teams and developing operations and design support. With Nikos' passion in marble and stone and all he's accomplished, paired with my background in design, it was the perfect opportunity to join together and see where we can take the company in the next several years," she says.

This positions Colonial Marble & Granite as a one-stop shop for customers. While the company has always worked with customers who already have a designer or architect for their project—and will continue to do so—they now have the capability to serve clients with different needs, including designing from scratch.

"We want to make it clear that we're not taking away from the designers out in the field with whom we've developed relationships over the years. We saw the need with clients walking through our doors who had nothing to start with, so whether they come in with a design already or they want us to create one, we're going to dive deeper with them on the project. It's not just taking them to the stone yard, but how does it work for their needs and how does the stone for the kitchen bring the home's whole story together?" Phillips says. "That means pulling the beauty of a stone and showing how it can be embellished with a backsplash, hardware, etc. ... How does it all work in the environment?"

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The possibilities are endless, she continues, adding that Colonial Marble & Granite is embarking on trends and products no one else in this area is carrying. "After the pandemic caused people to work from home, they realized they wanted the space to feel homier and more comfortable. The stark white counters and cabinets are beautiful and fresh, but not for spending all day in it. Now it's trending toward the warmer, comforting principles with earth and sand tones with gold accents and mixed metals," she says. "People also want color in the space for excitement and joy, and you may notice green and gray/blue cabinets more commonly now, which are a great complement to the warmer tones."

From Phillips' perspective, it's been exciting to integrate her design knowledge with the professionals on the stone side of the business. "I've gained a tremendous amount of appreciation for the products and natural stone. Each one is a work of art created by nature. There is so much talent on the staff and it's been great to develop these conversations about trends and how they affect the consumer walking through the door. So many customers are watching HGTV and reading magazines, and we're here to help them navigate those expectations and how to make them work for their environment," she says.

Customers won't have any issues finding the stone they want thanks to Colonial Marble & Granite's longstanding relationships with leading quartz vendors such as Viatera, Cosentino and MSI Surfaces, among others. "Stone supply has been in high demand and one of the most challenging products to procure because of that and supply chain shortages, but we've been able to get the stock we need. We have the largest natural slab yard in the Northeastern U.S. where you'll find anything you need," Phillips says.

Colonial Marble & Granite's King of Prussia slab yard is a "feast" for your eyes, as Phillips says. "Nikos has invested year after year in inventory and stock, and unique inventory at that. He has handpicked everything."

The company has even devoted nearly 5,500 square feet of showroom space to quartz as demand for it rises. "We're not talking just small samples laid out; these are full 52-foot-by-10-foot slabs that show every detailed pattern and unique design. No one else in the country has this selection," she says.

Every step of working with Colonial Marble & Granite puts the customer first, and it continues to welcome customers into any of its four physical locations, but also offers convenient in-home estimates as well. "We'll bring all of the samples and take you through the entire process. For us, this isn't just a sale, you're part of our family and we give everyone that same attention to detail," Phillips says. "This is a design-friendly environment and we're looking forward to the ideas that customers have and seeing how we can bring them to life with the best products available." H&H

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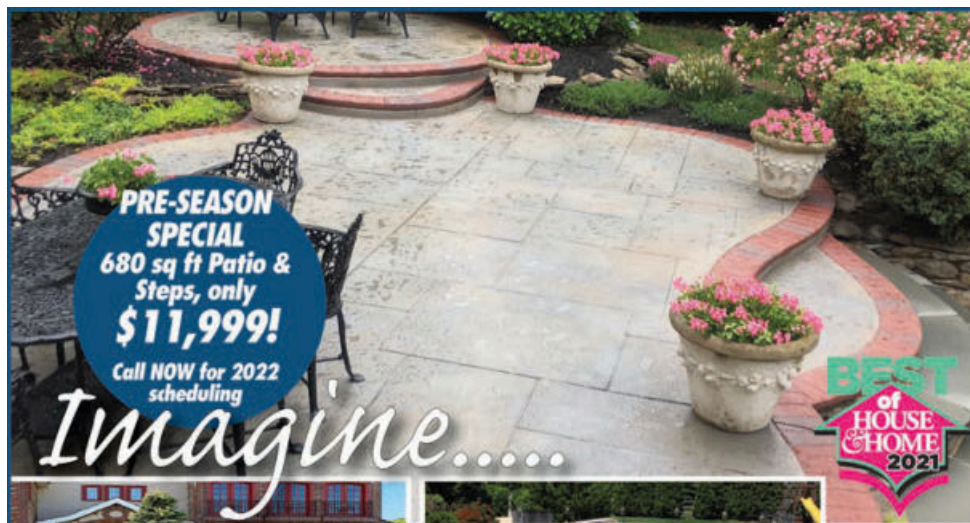
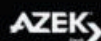


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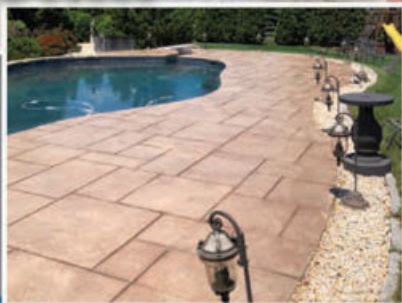
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A Contractor for All Seasons

The Delaware-based **A. W. Viohl Contracting** delivers high-quality remodeling and maintenance every month of the year, which means it's always the right time to get started on the interior or exterior project of your dreams.

by **Madeleine Maccar**

Anyone who loves what they do will tell you that they don't do it for the awards and accolades: They do it for the personal satisfaction, like knowing that they made a difference, finding the work rewarding and fostering strong relationships along the way.

"By the time a project's over, our clients have become part of our family," says Andrew Viohl of A. W. Viohl Contracting.

Viohl founded the company that bears his name in 2008 and, since then, has diligently amassed a team of in-house professionals whose dedication to clients and a job well-done mirror his own, and whose talents come together to make the Delaware-based contractor a truly versatile, trustworthy indoor and outdoor service that can do it all.

"The guys who work with me are good buddies, we've been working together for a long time. We're like a family and we're family-oriented," Viohl explains. "We know what we're doing, and we know how to work together. We've been doing this for 20-some years, so we've pretty much seen it all."

And while Viohl appreciates the talent on his team and knows they're absolute professionals who can navigate any challenges that may arise

along the way, the awards are a nice confirmation that the A. W. Viohl team is on the right track. Having been recognized as one of *House & Home* magazine's Best of the Best is one of the contractor's most recent honors.

"We're out there working as hard as we can, so it means a lot to all of us," Viohl says.

But Viohl and his team are never content to rest on their laurels. Whether it's renovating a basement, creating an addition, updating a kitchen or bathroom, repairing a deck or boosting the longevity of a roof, they aim for nothing less than the best for the homeowners who trust them with their interior and exterior remodeling goals.

"We're not rushing from one project to the next," Viohl promises. "Our focus is on you and your home, including finishing the job right."

And there's never an offseason for the year-round operation, which means they're not only scheduling projects for the spring but also breaking ground on a few now. It often comes as a pleasant surprise for clients who are planning ahead for the warmer months—or aren't about to let winter stand in the way of their renovation projects.

"I don't think you should react to a customer

by saying 'Why do you want to do a deck now?' and I don't like turning down work: Whatever job people need done, we'll do it regardless of season," Viohl says. "We're always doing projects, even in January and February. On the other hand, we also have calls now to get on the books to start work three months out. That gives us time to get the production going, to get all the permits we need so come March, April or May, we're ready to go for them."

With the pandemic entering its third year and people still spending more time at home than usual, Viohl says that renovations and updates are just as in-demand as ever.

"People have these old wood decks with the boards falling through and loose railings, or they've had the deck for 15, 20 years and they're just tired of the maintenance for staining and sanding, so they want them updated with materials to achieve a maintenance-free result," he explains. "You still have to clean it because it's going to get dirty, but it's not like you'll have to power-wash it every two years or watch out for splitting wood and handrails splintering."

Viohl adds that features like composite decking boards and vinyl railings will ultimately save homeowners some money. "You won't have that extra yearly fee or every two years because you're paying someone to stain it or pressure-wash it."

The pandemic's influence on the supply chain is still causing some lingering delays, affecting the immediate availability of some materials, like grout in certain colors, cabinetry options and particularly windows. "Some windows can still take up to three months to be delivered," Viohl notes. But he says that A. W. Viohl's clients are generally understanding and realize the delays are just a part of construction right now.

Viohl diligently encourages open lines of communication, both with the homeowner and among his team. It ensures everyone is on the same page at every stage of the project while managing clients' expectations—because it is, no matter the project, always about making sure a customer is completely satisfied.

"A lot of the jobs we do are for repeat customers, so they've been there and know what to expect," he says. "They know that they're getting the quality work they're paying for. It's an honor when they hire us for repeat work, and we want to make sure they'll call us for their next job." **H&H**

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Building from the Ground Up

In business for 15 years, family-owned **F&J Builders** continues to add services and give clients ways to beautify their homes, inside and out.

In 2007, Jenny Biddle and her husband Francis made the bold decision to start their own home improvement company with nothing but a truck, a Home Depot credit card, grand dreams and complete faith in each other. Fifteen years, many jobs and one impressive new showroom later, the gamble has paid off.

Today, F&J Builders has evolved into one of the most successful contracting businesses in Delaware, offering everything from kitchen and bathroom remodels to additions and outdoor living spaces. They also have a separate DBA, F&J Roofing & Siding, making them experts in exterior projects, including roofing, siding and the installation of windows and doors.

“Francis can build a house from the ground up,” Jenny says. “He has so much experience and it allows the customers to trust us. He’s been through everything and he guides our teams in the right direction. It also helps customers think outside the box. That’s why our motto is, ‘Listen Better, Plan Better, Build Better.’ We take in what the homeowners

want, we give them advice and then we move forward with the ideas.”

While Francis and Jenny used to work from their kitchen table and had employees shuffling in and out of their house all day, they’ve since opened a showroom in Wilmington. In addition to the office space, it gives customers an opportunity to see decking and railing materials, roofing and siding displays and much more up close. “It helps to actually touch it and see it face to face rather than picking it out of a book,” she says.

Homeowners are encouraged to visit the showroom to get ideas for their next project and meet with the team, where they are sure to find an approachable, down-to-earth staff they can envision working with. While there, customers can personalize every aspect of their home’s exterior, maximizing curb appeal with every element. F&J Roofing & Siding carries the leading manufacturers in the industry, including James Hardie fiber cement siding, known for its durability and visual appeal.

The company has risen to Preferred Contractor Status with James Hardie products, one of the highest levels awarded to any contractor, achieved by demonstrating high standards, a proven track record of quality results and a history of satisfied customers. “With the projects that we completed last year, they went to each one of the sites and did an inspection of the product and how it was installed,” she says. “Everything was installed perfectly, exactly as

it should be, and was able to be 100% warranted. Because of those assessments, that put us at the Preferred tier.”

The craftsmanship doesn’t stop at exterior improvements. F&J has been called upon for interior remodeling and additions, and is even a member of the National Kitchen & Bath Association (NKBA). Their designer, Antoinette Nunez, is a Certified Designer with the NKBA—in fact, she was recognized as one of the top NKBA “Thirty Under 30” designers in the country.

Even if F&J is on site for an interior project, Jenny says they will provide a checkup on the home’s exterior as well. “While we’re there, we help assess the exterior, roofing, siding and windows so it can all be done at once. That way it’s done and their house is safe and secure for the next 30 years.”

Jenny and Francis, the proud parents of three daughters, exemplify the term “family business,” and are pleased to provide reliable home improvement services to other families in the region.

“Francis and I are great partners,” Jenny says. “Our employees are also a big part of our lives and we consider them family. We really could not do any of this without them.”

“We have remained humble since starting our business,” Jenny says. “It’s hard to please every single person but we learn from any mistake that is made and our goal is to make everyone a satisfied customer.” **H&H**



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LANDSCAPING ISN'T JUST FOR THE WARM-WEATHER MONTHS, and area experts have plenty of advice for all the ways you can use the rest of winter to plan, prune and prepare to ensure that the outdoor oasis of your dreams comes to life once spring has sprung.



Preparing for *Spring*

by **Madeleine Maccar**

It's tempting to regard the winter as a temporary reprieve from outdoor projects, especially when the cozy indoors become more and more appealing with every cold snap and snow storm.

But being too lax with your property in the dormant season can come back to haunt you in the spring. By sitting out the winter, you lose out on valuable designing time, an optimal place on professionals' client schedules and staying on top of necessary yard maintenance, to say nothing of the extra work winter neglect can make for you in the spring.

Even just using this time to plan ahead can be a proactive approach to kickstarting your property's yearly transition from cold-weather dormancy to spring's reawakening. "Winter is probably the most ideal time of the year to plan these projects," says Mike Pasquarello of Elite Landscaping. "There is much more added time and attention that can be given to the design phase, with actual installation construction slower due to weather constraints."

As more and more people are bringing the comfort and personal flourishes of their home's interiors outside, they're casting a keen eye on its landscaping and hardscaping potential. Whether your upcoming outdoor projects are major overhauls, more about simple updates or anywhere in between, the region's landscaping professionals have plenty of advice about how you can embrace the winter months to get started, maximize the lifespan of your yard's features and boost your home's overall curb appeal.

Your Property's Plant Life

With the pandemic entering its third year and people still spending more time at home than ever before, they've been able to focus on truly personalizing their living spaces. Some already tackled their major landscaping goals a season or two ago and are focusing on maintenance and upkeep, while others are just now getting around to their outdoor overhaul.

"Homeowners spending more time at home has given us more opportunities to create healthy, beautiful, pest-free living spaces to beautify their property more," confirms Madison Malik of Joshua

Tree Experts. "Winter is very important as the beginning of a project's planning stage. We arborists have more time in the winter to really nurture our clients' property and create a great maintenance plan with them moving forward."

Winterizing a living yard actually begins in the fall. That's when it's crucial to lay down a protective layer of "compost or high-end mulch that doesn't introduce new weeds to your garden" to protect plants' root systems from the cold and prevent their soil from drying out in the harsh weather, says Ronni Hock of Ronni Hock Garden & Landscape.

"Snow is actually great for your garden: A blanket of snow on the ground is marvelous because it acts as an extra blanket protecting it from the winter winds, and those winds are what's most damaging to your plant life and soil," she notes.

Unsurprisingly, your yard's soil is a crucial component in determining how exactly your landscaping goals will come to life, as its composition will indicate what kind of foliage will thrive there. Hock points out that



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winter is a great time to get your soil tested, and says that all kinds of resources offer testing kits, like the bigger tree companies, any county office of Rutgers University's New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station Cooperative Extension or a local gardening center.

"It's all in the soil: If your soil's not right, nothing is going to grow no matter what you plant in it," she says. "Once you test your soil and send out your sample, you'll get your results back and an explanation of what they mean and what you should be planting."

Ryan Panetta of D. Panetta Contracting says the winter can be a great time to study your property's relationship to the elements.

"Do some research to see how the sun travels across your property," he suggests, adding that websites like SunCalc.org can help in determining things like daylight duration, shadow lengths, average solar paths and more to ensure you're designing natural elements that are harmonious with your unique geographic location and its features.

Take Advantage of the Dormant Season

With winter's bare branches and dormant plant life making parts of your yard more accessible in the cold months, it's also an opportune time to get hands-on and reshape

Preparing for *Spring*

some of your more unwieldy overgrown landscaping elements.

"Winter pruning is great to do during the late winter months, as you really can easily see and evaluate branching habits of a deciduous shrub or tree," says Pasquarello.

"Some tree pruning is optimal to perform in the winter, despite the common misconception that springtime is best," Malik adds. "This includes pruning fruit trees because they become dormant or pruning diseased trees. When it comes to accessing hard-to-reach trees, winter is an optimal time to perform that service—plus, the soil conditions often create a more compact ground, which supports heavy equipment without damaging the lawn."

She also suggests removing dead or dangerous trees, as well as any unsightly stumps. "You'll want to look at mature trees with hazardous deadwood, as well as hazardous oak trees. Tree removals and stump grinding also become ideal in the winter if you are looking to plant a new tree in its place, since it provides plenty of time to prep the area to plant again in the spring. If you wait until spring, the optimal window for planting will have passed."

Panetta notes that a little winter landscaping

TLC can be hugely beneficial for plant life once spring returns, whether it's tidying up or introducing native species to your landscaping.

"Starting in the fall through now, it's nice to get all your plant material properly trimmed and pruned back to make sure the snow doesn't do any damage to your plant material," he explains. "Make sure your grass is all cleaned up and there's no grass clippings or leaves on it so when spring comes, it has a better chance to germinate and a better chance to thrive."

"If you're OK with digging through the frozen ground, you can do transplants," Panetta continues. "They'll just kind of stay dormant until springtime, which is when you'll have to revisit them and make sure everything's coming in properly. We've done a lot of pine plantings and spruce plantings this time of year. They're all in their element, so they'll be dormant until they start thriving in the spring."

Some Final Words of Advice

The frozen ground, snowy runoffs, soggy daytime conditions that refreeze at night, and the overall harshness and unpredictability of Northeastern winters make it a suboptimal time to break ground on a new walkway or steps. It is, however, a good opportunity for examining cement, concrete and other hard fixtures for signs of weathering and wear so you know exactly

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Most high-quality construction should be fine after just one winter, though the introduction of salt and other de-icing agents can be what rapidly ages those features. "The one thing that really hurts everything in the winter is the chemicals and salt you use, which could do damage to certain materials," Panetta explains.

The kind of winter weather we have will definitely impact the kind of spring maintenance you'll have to do. To minimize the damage of harsh winds, driving snow and inclement weather that can kill plants, Pasquarello has some proactive tips to ensure your yard's plant life lives to see another spring.

"Protect trees and shrubs from snow and ice, which can bend and break branches," he says. "Many ever-green varieties of trees and shrubs become extremely weighted with snow and ice and become damaged beyond repair. Simply tying outer smaller branches to inner central leaders will give an added strength to withstand the stresses of snow and ice load."

With the uptick in landscaping services' demands, now is the time to start talking with professionals and snagging your place on their schedules before it's too late.

"In a normal year, if you called in January, you could probably expect to get your work done by late spring or early summer but now, with the pandemic and the volume of calls and leads, I'm working on projects that I started last summer," notes Hock. "And it's not just me: It's across the board with anyone in the business and construction because there's been such a big explosion of demand, which is a blessing and a curse."

No matter what your landscaping goals are, the size of your property or the features you want to personalize your outdoor space with, the must-dos remain the same, according to Malik.



"If there's one thing every homeowner should keep in mind when it comes to caring for their homes' outdoor spaces, it's to prioritize preventative maintenance and yearly inspections," she says. "They are both extremely important." **H&H**



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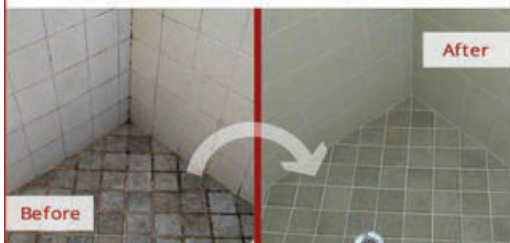
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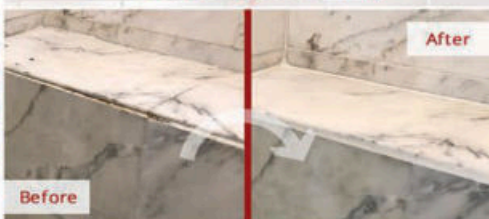
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Launches New Interiors Division. *by Erica Reilly*

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Joe Salvatore, president of FSBD, is excited to offer clients these new interior options. "From custom kitchens to bathrooms, we can now design and build interior and exterior improvement projects—all with a seamless process from design concept to completion," he says.

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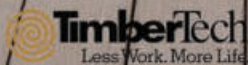
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