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Volume 23, Issue 5

Imperial Marble & Granite

Providing dedicated customer service and exclusive products to more Pennsylvania homeowners *page 11*

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OUR ANNUAL LANDSCAPE, POOL, PATIO AND DECK DIRECTORY
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The latest trends in kitchen and bath remodeling page 31

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Architectural Concrete Design

Bringing unmatched expertise and a designer's eye to decorative concrete projects *page 29*

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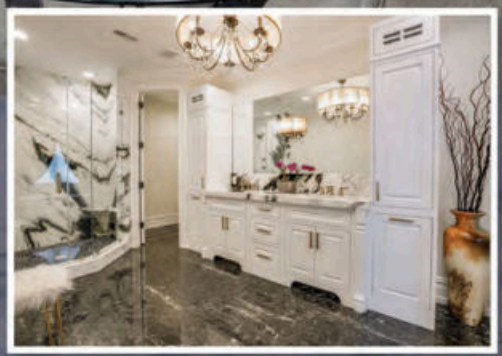
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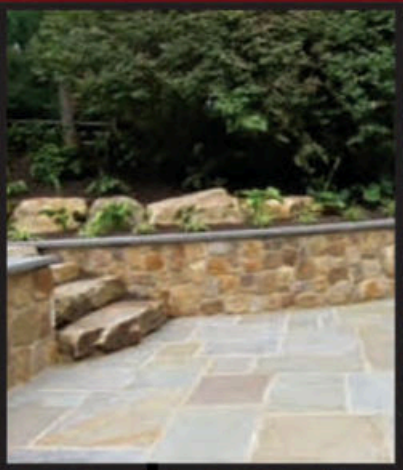
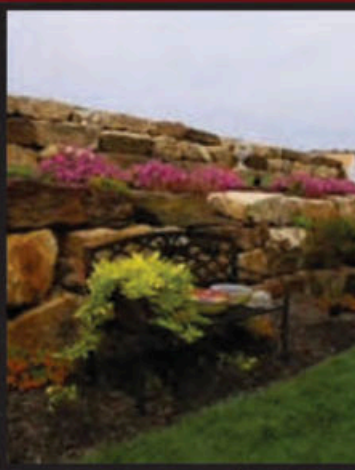
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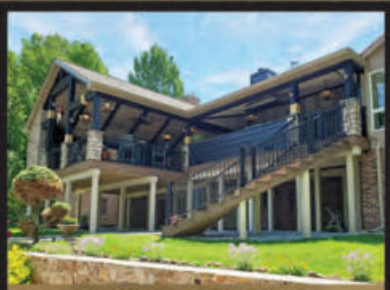
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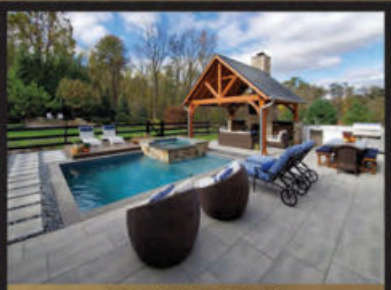
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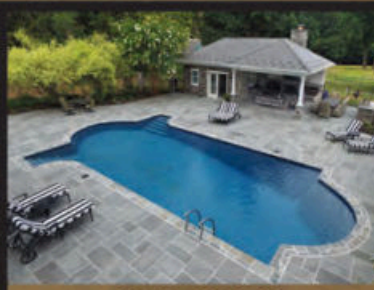
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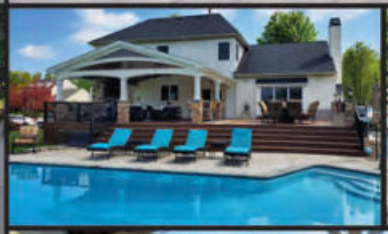


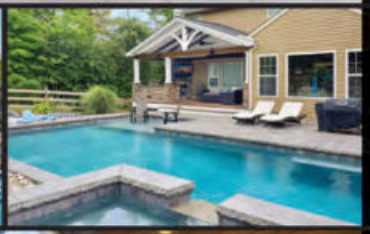
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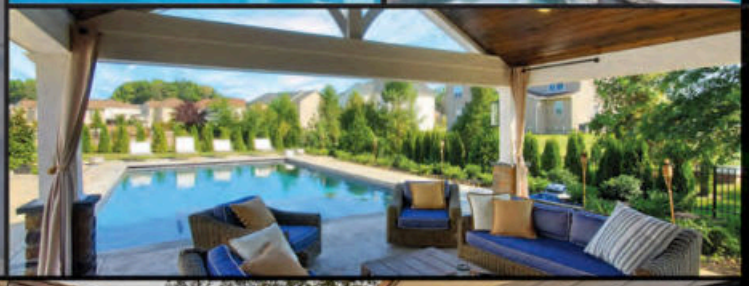
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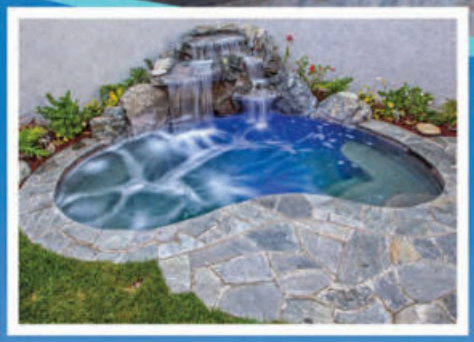
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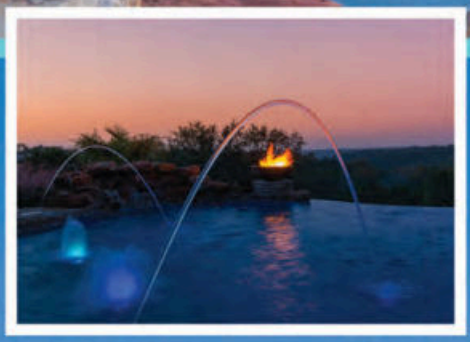
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Just a Stone's Throw Away

Debuting a West Chester showroom earlier this year has helped **Imperial Marble & Granite** bring its dedicated customer service and exclusive products to even more Pennsylvania homeowners. *by* **Madeleine Maccar**

Imperial Marble & Granite

Main location: 200 Old Tinicum Island Road, H Complex, Essington, Pa. (610) 521-0130

Showroom: 1311 West Chester Pike, West Chester, Pa. (610) 738-5277 | **IMGStone.net**

Since 2004, Imperial Marble & Granite has been working with clients from all over eastern Pennsylvania to design, fabricate and install uniquely stunning natural stone and quartz furnishings, from residential kitchens and bathrooms to retail establishments' reception spaces and dining areas.

But owner Albert Kzelian noticed a worrisome decline in clients from Exton, Malvern, King of Prussia, West Chester and other areas for whom Imperial's Essington location was just a little too far away.

So, just like with every job Imperial puts its name on, Kzelian came up with a solution that prioritizes his customers' needs: establishing a showroom closer to them.

"I said, 'OK, if you guys don't want to come to us, we'll come to you,'" he begins. "An opportunity came up at this location in West Chester and I could not resist. We built a 4,000-square-foot, beautiful showroom, and it's right on West Chester Pike."

The result was a wide-open, thoughtfully designed space. Open since April, that West Chester showroom is already a resoundingly well-received success.

One of the most striking features of the Imperial showroom is that there are no tiny samples trying to approximate the full extent of all the colors and natural beauty that exist in one piece of marble or granite: The entire slab is available for client scrutiny, which Kzelian says is crucial in helping them fully assess a stone they're considering for their home.

"The sample certainly doesn't justify what the slab looks like," he explains. "The slabs have so many variations that a sample that's just six or 12 inches isn't going to tell you about the entire piece because that piece has gold, gray, white, beige, all these different colors that a sample can't show you. So when the customer sees the whole entire piece, they're like, 'Oh my God, this is beautiful!' or 'Wow, this is not what I was expecting, it's too busy.'"

But the showroom, Kzelian points out, "is not just for countertops." It's also where you can find an array of ceramic and marble tile, vanities, faucets and sinks, knobs, kitchen cabinetry, lighting and even sound systems. Imperial also outsources appliances so "we can give everything to the customer looking for a complete kitchen."

"We have a variety of different things," Kzelian says. "A homeowner could come in and purchase pretty much everything for every room all at once."

The Imperial team stays on top of current trends and client-demographic preferences—Kzelian notes that customers under 40 tend to gravitate to the manmade quartz but those 40 and older still prefer more natural stone like granite and marble, while neutral colors are staging a comeback in demand across the board—that guide their offerings.

And for much of those in-stock options, Kzelian adds that Imperial is the only place in the state where they can be purchased. "There are specific products or colors that we're the exclusive dealers of in Pennsylvania. Nobody else carries them or has them."

While the West Chester showroom gives clients a chance to get an up-close, hands-on look at all the pieces Imperial has in stock, one of the biggest advantages to them is the cost savings that comes with making a purchase directly with Imperial.

But what really differentiates Imperial from the rest is the kind of dedicated, attentive client support that drove Kzelian to open up a showroom to better assist his customers in the first place.

"Customer service is No. 1, No. 2 is craftsmanship and No.3—which is the most important thing—is turnaround," he says. "From template to install, it's a 10-day turnaround.We have the technology and machinery to back us up. Everything is done by digital measurements and laser measurements, so that helps us make things more precise and accurate."



It is that determination to deliver high-quality, skilled and minimally intrusive work to clients that Kzelian believes will ensure that Imperial keeps growing so it can keep finding new ways to ensure all their clients' needs are met.

"We started out in 2004 with six employees and now have 43," says Kzelian. "Our second location is helping us to continue helping clients with a warehouse experience that has all the beautiful lights and design of a showroom." H&H

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Choosing the perfect stone takes careful consideration, and the guidance of someone who knows the product. At AAA Hellenic, customers can turn to professionals who have decades of experience designing and installing stone in kitchens, bathrooms, foyers, fireplaces and even in outdoor living spaces. Mike Werner, sales manager, is one such expert who has been with the family-focused company for more than 10 years.

House & Home spoke with Werner about how new products from Silestone and Dekton are giving people the high-end looks they've wanted at a more reasonable price.



Mike Werner, sales manager

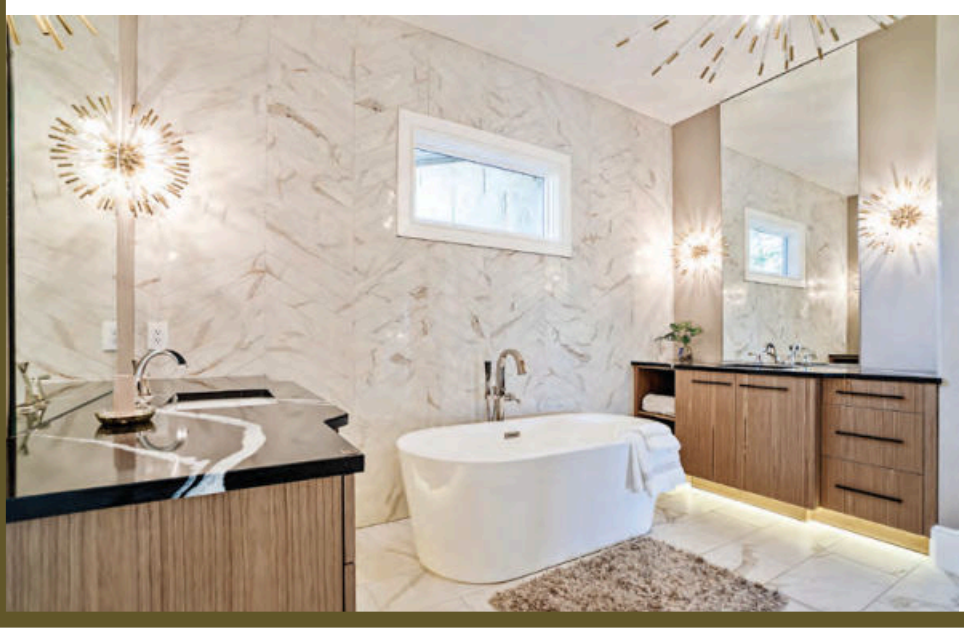
WHEN YOU MEET WITH CLIENTS, WHAT ARE SOME THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR LIFESTYLE TO GUIDE THEIR SELECTION?

Most individuals typically have saved pictures they found online or in magazines to establish an idea of their design preferences. We also want to know about what's going on in the space where the stone will be used. Every household is different. Materials they might like or find attractive might not be the best choice for their home. Granite is very dense and durable. It is heat resistant and scratch resistant, with minimal maintenance. Marble is a classic choice with unrivaled beauty and gives you a timeless look. It may be a little softer than granite, but will still give you a very durable surface.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE EMERGING POPULARITY OF NATURAL STONE QUARTZITE AND YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF IT?

Engineered quartz has gained popularity over the past couple of years, but natural stone is still the most requested for its beauty and durability. Natural stone quartzite is an especially good choice for kitchens. Everyone likes the look of marble, but it's softer and more porous. Quartzite is a dense stone that can handle the impact and functionality in a kitchen, and it's not as porous.

We directly import this stone from the quarries to our facility, which enables us to pass discounted pricing on to clients for rare quartzites in a wide variety of colors. The materials are temperamental and require a high level of care and precision, which Hellenic excels and specializes in.



WHAT ARE THE NEWEST MATERIALS ON THE MARKET AND WHERE ARE THEY BEST USED IN THE HOME?

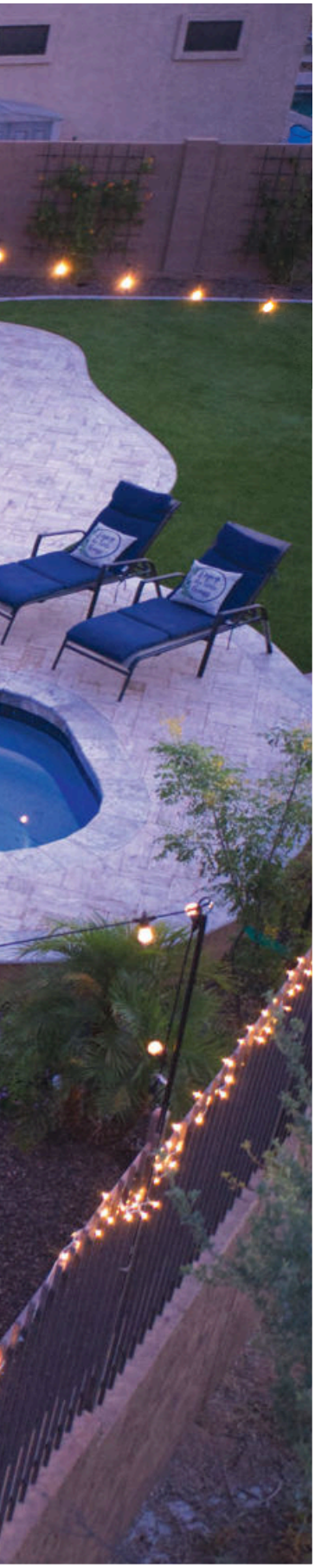
We're really excited about the design potential with products from Silestone and Dekton in shower wall and bathroom applications. People have been longing for a solid-slab, seamless look on their shower walls—nobody likes grout joints—but this comes with additional labor to get these large slabs into tight shower spaces. These new products are more durable and thinner, making them easier to transport and install. Silestone is engineered quartz and in particular has some nice combinations of natural stone-looking materials, as well as muted patterns for the monochromatic look people want. Dekton is a porcelain and glass hybrid with quartz that is more durable and still gives that desirable natural stone look. This is something that we are specializing in.

HOW CAN CUSTOMERS ARRANGE TO VISIT YOUR SLAB YARD TO SEE THEIR OPTIONS?

Our slab yard is open by appointment so we can control the amount of people in the building at a time, everything is spaced out and we also have outdoor inventory available weather permitting. We have implemented additional safety measures, including UV light systems and UV air purifiers to reduce airborne contaminants and provide more peace of mind for customers. We also offer virtual appointments.

Our inventory of marble, granite, soapstone and quartzite is very strong right now, we've added a lot of new products for people. We have about 200 different colors on display, and our stones are directly imported from places like Italy, Brazil and Africa. It's always beneficial to walk through and see the stone in different lighting, and more often than not, people find something they never expected. H&H





SWIMMING IN STYLE

WITH THE RIGHT GUIDANCE, YOU COULD BE ENJOYING LIFE POOLSIDE FOR MANY YEARS TO COME.

BY PETER PROKO

Though it may be hard to recognize after the extremely mild winter we experienced here in the Northeast, spring is in the air. With the flowers in full bloom and the temperatures getting warmer and warmer by the day, we are all looking forward to spending increased time outdoors as we gear ourselves up for the sun-drenched days of summer that won't be far behind.

And while countless folks will enjoy tending to their landscaping or perhaps spending time enjoying a glass of wine on the back deck while watching the sun go down, many others will be eagerly awaiting the return of swim season and the chance to cool off by taking a dip in the pool.

It's no secret that pool ownership skyrocketed during the onset of the pandemic, with homeowners opting to create their own backyard resorts rather than travel on vacation. While the industry has seen that intense demand lessen somewhat, the fact is with each passing year, more and more people are looking to transform their outdoor living space into a staycation destination, and in many cases it all starts with the pool.

But there's a lot to consider and know about pool ownership, and if you're not fully prepared you could find yourself treading water as you desperately search for answers. Luckily, this region is full of skillful pool builders who can guide you through each step of the process, and in turn help make your visions of an outdoor oasis a reality.

We spoke to several industry experts to get some tips and advice on what you need to know to make a real splash this summer, no matter if you're considering a new pool for your yard or are simply looking for ways to enhance your current swimming experience.

SETTLING ON A STYLE

When it comes time to picking out a pool, the first place to start is deciding on what style is right for you between vinyl, fiberglass or concrete. Each one has their pros and cons—and price point for that matter—and what may be appealing to some may not necessarily be so for others.

Vinyl liners, which come in a variety of colors and styles, are by far the least expensive avenue to becoming a pool owner. As a result, vinyl pools remain popular and the advancements made in recent years have only increased their favorability in the marketplace.

But while the cost may be initially lower, depending on several contributing factors, the lifespan of a vinyl liner can vary dramatically and thus may need to be replaced more frequently. That could mean shelling out another $5,000-$6,000 periodically throughout the course of owning the pool.

"The cons of a vinyl pool is the liner is temporary. It could last 15 years or maybe five years," says Scott Payne, dubbed as the chief backyard fun specialist with Scott Payne Custom Pools. "At some point, what happens here in the Northeast with the freeze and thaw is that the liner is going to shift a little bit. And it's going to deteriorate [over time]. The sun's UV rays are going to degredate it and at some point

SWIMMING IN STYLE



you are going to have to replace it."

Meanwhile, fiberglass pools come in preformed shells allowing for a quicker installation process than other styles, with many pools being able to be completed in a just a day's time as opposed to the much lengthier process to install a vinyl or concrete pool.

Derek Blasker, president of (Fiberglass) Pool Designs, says the lifetime structural warranties and relatively low upkeep make fiberglass pools an attractive option for many.

"With a vinyl liner pool, you will always have the concern that you could tear the liner or the liner rots within five to 10 years. With concrete, you need to acid wash, paint, patch and resurface the masonry work. This usually runs at least $15,000 over a 10-year span. With the Latham fiberglass pools we install, you do not touch the surface," he says.

Blasker adds that fiberglass pools are a natural insulator, reducing the energy costs to heat and maintain the pool.

Jon Wilson, director of operations at Ordini's Best Fiberglass Pools, also touts the benefits. "Fiberglass pools are installed in one day, while vinyl and concrete pools can take weeks or months to build. The smooth gelcoat finish of our fiberglass pools are much easier to clean than the rough, porous surface of concrete pools."

With regard to concrete or gunite pools, while they are the most expensive choice for pool owners, they also offer the most customizable options in terms of freeform shapes and added amenities.

"With concrete pools, you can really go from mild to wild in terms of shape. And you could add sundecks, spas, loveseats; it's really only limited to your imagination," says Payne.

Speaking of shapes, the rumors of the death of rectangular pools have been greatly exaggerated, according to Andrew McFarlane, president and owner of California Pools Philadelphia.

"I thought [rectangular pools] were kind of a dead thing, but a lot of our higher-end customers are bringing them back," McFarlane says.

Payne has also seen an uptick in rectangular pools making a strong comeback, saying it's a matter of history repeating itself.

"Twenty-five years ago, people were tired of seeing rectangles and you saw the kidney bean and other freeform shapes, but I'd says we are close to 50-50 between installing rectangular and freeform pools now," he says.

Ultimately, the right shape should be dictated by each individual client's desire. Are they looking for a pool to swim in or is it more of a social gathering place? Do they want a diving pool? What will create a more seamless transition with the rest of the backyard?

"If clients want a clean look, they go with rectangles. And if they want more of the natural resort-type feel, then you see the freeform pools with the rock grottos and waterslides and that sort of stuff," says McFarlane.

A TOUCH OF SALT

Think back to your childhood days spent at the pool and you're likely to invoke memories of the smell of chlorine on your skin and irritated red eyes. And so it's no wonder that the industry has evolved over the years and in doing so has seen salt-generated chlorinator systems become the prevalent choice for pool owners. With benefits ranging from making the water gentler on the skin to reduced maintenance costs, salt systems have become the standard in the industry today.

"Just about every pool I install is saltwater; I haven't probably put in a chlorination pool in five years," says Walter Beyer, owner of Stardust Pools. "There's a lot less upkeep and the temperature doesn't affect it. It could be 105 degrees or 65 degrees; it could be sunny or it could be rainy; your pool is always going to have the same level of chlorine. … As long as the pool is running, it will be crystal clear all the time."

"Salt will also reduce your ownership costs dramatically. Instead of spending $500-$600 a year on chlorine, you might spend $40 a year on salt and achieve the same benefits," says Payne.

But while the salt systems make pools easier to balance and maintain, there can also be some negatives associated. "The upside is that you do not need to play with tablets and powders, the salt will be gentle on your skin, you can open your eyes underwater without the burn, the salt will not bleach anything, and blonde hair will not turn green," says Blasker. "The downside is that the salt will produce an alkaline effect that raises your pH and salt will have an adverse effect on steel railings, ladders, etc."

Also something to take into consideration is that "homeowners like the 'set it and forget it' aspect of a saltwater system, but it is an added expense, and the salt cell requires maintenance and eventually will need to be replaced every handful of years," says Wilson.

And no matter if you have a salt or chlorine pool, maintaining proper water chemistry is crucial. While some DIY-ers may attempt to handle balancing things on their own, it is truly best to get your water tested by a professional to assure you don't cause damage to your pool.

Tracy Bond is the president and owner of Great Valley Pool Service and says at the very least, weekly water testing is recommended. Sometimes even more frequent tests are needed if the pool is heavily used or has been recently built or refinished.

"There are many different things that can impact your water chemistry from the weather to the number of people using the pool to things like pets, pollen, fertilizer drift, grass clippings, etc.," says Bond. "It is important that your water is regularly tested and adjusted to avoid damage that can occur to your pool's finish, to your pool equipment and to ensure that your water is properly sanitized for your bathers to prevent illness. Proper balancing also prevents problems from occurring like algae and cloudy water as well."

And for those who don't have the time to wait in line at the shop, Bond's crew will come to you. "We offer a recurring service where we clean and chemically balance the pool each week. This includes testing and balancing your water; emptying all skimmer and pump baskets; backwashing and cleaning the filter as needed; as well as skimming, brushing and vacuuming the pool," she says.

ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE

While seeing the kids do cannonballs into the deep end or waking up early each day to swim laps may be a welcomed aspect of owning a pool, these days owners are looking to up the ante with plenty of bells and whistles.

"Maybe someone doesn't have kids and they want their backyard to be a place to gather with other adults for happy hour or dinner, and so they want a sitting area. And perhaps they don't want to have giant waterfalls, but would like to hear the sound of water, so we'll add a couple deck jets so they can hear the water trickle,"

Image courtesy of Scott Payne Custom Pools

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SWIMMING IN STYLE

McFarlane says. "And then you have other people who say they want to have a water slide and a jumping rock for the kids."

And technology is playing a big part as well. Robotic cleaners, variable speed pumps and LED lighting have become the norm and growing automation capabilities are allowing folks to control many aspects of their pool's upkeep right in the palm of their hand.

"Automation is probably the most popular added element today. [These] systems allow the homeowner to control pumps, lights, heaters, deck jets and other pool accessories from their smart phone," Wilson says.

COVERING THE BASICS

Another area not to be overlooked is whether a mesh or solid safety cover is the right choice for you. Mesh covers—the less expensive of the two options—are lighter, easier to maneuver, but do allow some light and small debris into the pool, although recent advancements have increased their effectiveness in combatting these issues. On the flipside, solid covers do not allow any water, debris or UV light into the pool. This eliminates all algae growth during the winter, so you need less winterizing chemicals and the spring cleanup is easier.

Ultimately, it comes down to the preference of the homeowner on the level of maintenance they wish to take on.

"Solid covers are a little more expensive and there's also a little bit more maintenance involved. You have to manage the water on top of that cover because it's not going to go through it, so you have to maintain a surface pump on there and through the winter you have to make sure the pump is working," says McFarlane.

"The solid covers have a lot of benefits in that the way you close the pool is typically the way you open the pool," says Beyer. "When you have a mesh cover, when the leaves fall off onto the cover and they disintegrate and it rains, that filters through the cover and so the pools don't open up as clear."

Bond cautions that owners of solid covers remain vigilant on keeping an eye on their pumping system to make sure that all of the excess water is being funneled off of the cover.

"Excessive weight will cause the cover to sag," she says. "A saggy safety cover is more likely to fail over time."

No matter what kind of pool you purchase or what extra elements you consider, the key is to do your homework before you put pen to paper on a pricey contract so you feel confident you are hiring the right contractor instead of finding yourself with a money pit in the backyard for years to come.

"No company is perfect, but the difference in contractors is made when an issue arises, and how that contractor handles that issue," says Blasker. "You want a contractor who is going to take your call, present you with a plan and execute upon that plan in a timely manner." H&H

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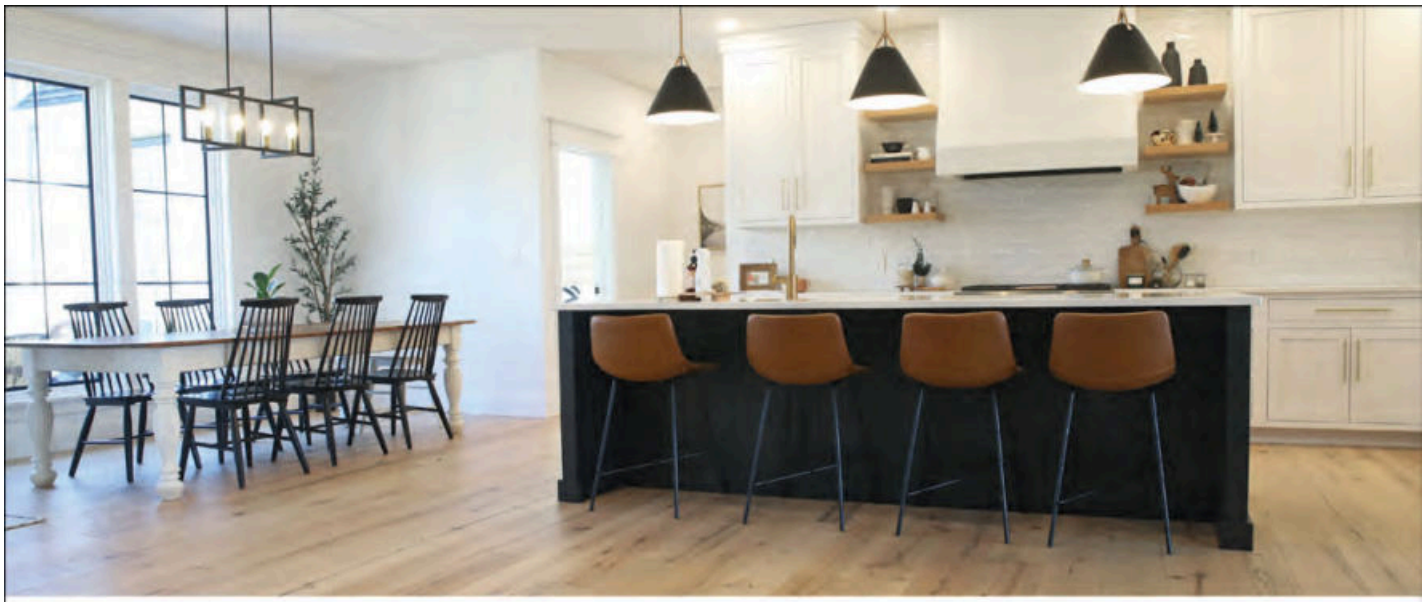
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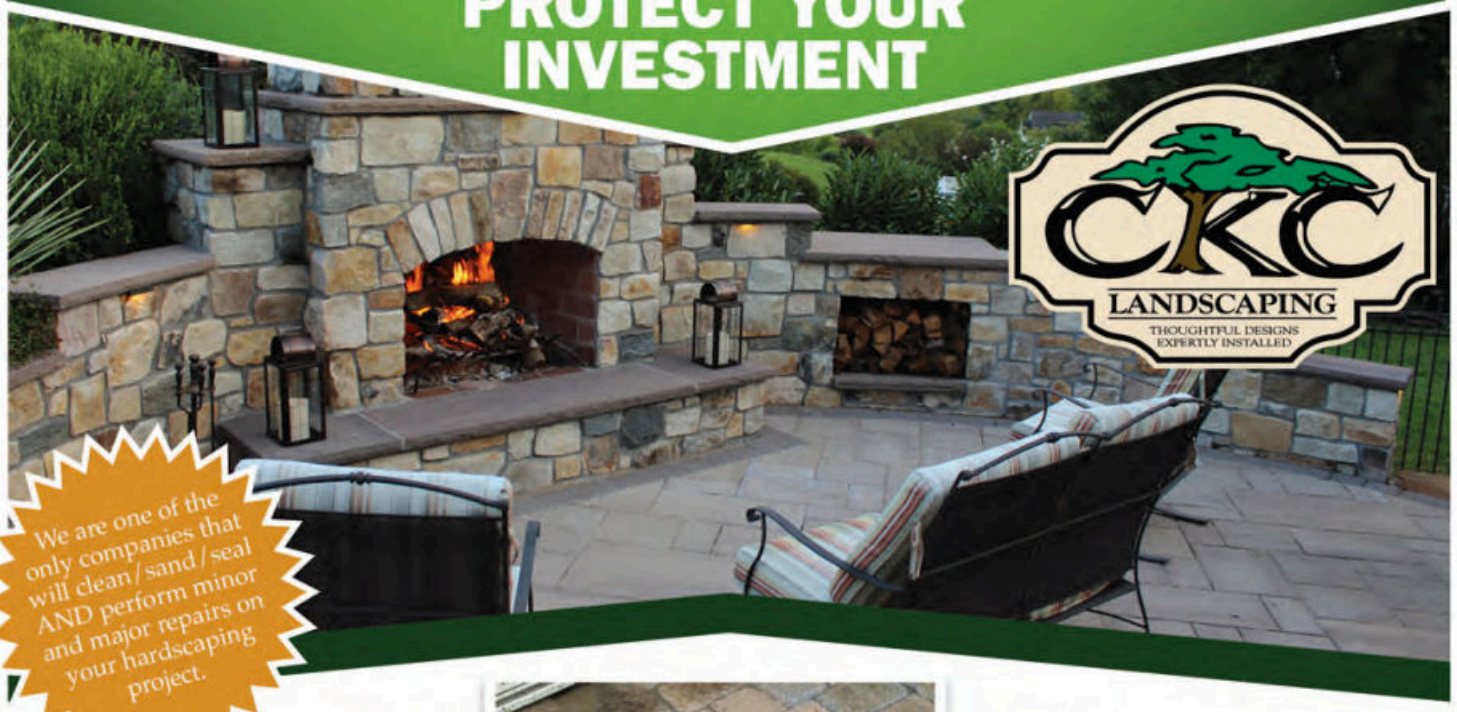
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It's safe to say that the pandemic has taught us to appreciate the outdoors even more. While backyard outdoor living areas have been soaring in popularity for years now, for many, the stay-at-home orders and the experience of being stuck indoors for so long have made homeowners absolutely crave these spaces more than ever. They are truly a must-have—a fact that's been increasingly evident at Sequoia Out Back, where owner John Keller says that he's seeing even more people come into the showroom than ever before.

From the moment that homeowners walk through Sequoia Out Back's front doors, the experience is really unlike any other. The 30,000-square-foot showroom has everything you could want for your personal oasis on display so that you can envision it in your own backyard.

When you walk through a typical patio store or a big-box store, items aren't usually set up or paired together the way they would be in your backyard so it can be difficult to visualize your finished space. At Sequoia, you can see an entire outdoor living space the way that you might set it up on your own patio. It inspires so many ideas.

The goal of the showroom has always been to make homeowners feel like they're stepping into a real-life outdoor space. This helps homeowners to make the best choices when it comes to furniture and decking supplies that will work for their own projects.

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At Sequoia, you can see an entire outdoor living space the way that you might set it up on your own patio. It inspires so many ideas.

experience. Customers always leave Sequoia with a lot of great ideas and information.

Of course, in general, inventory has been a major issue since the start of the pandemic. Homeowners who have tried to purchase furniture and decking may have noticed limited stock. But Sequoia Out Back has been fortunate to be able to keep a lot of inventory in stock thanks to its relationship with manufacturers and its purchasing power, as well as having a large quantity from the start. Even so, with so many people coming through the doors, now is the time to start planning for the spring while inventory is still available.

After all, before you know it, the weather will be consistently warm, and we'll all be spending even more time outdoors. Homeowners want to make sure their space is ready now!

"The sooner you can start planning, the better," urges Keller. "The number of visitors coming to the store right now is higher than ever for this time of year. It's definitely not too early to start thinking about setting up your outdoor space."

As you start planning, Sequoia Out Back has all of the amenities that you might want to consider. This includes fire pits, patio furniture and all of the material supplies including decking and railing and hardscaping. Sequoia works with all of the leading manufacturers including TimberTech, Wolf, Trex, Zuri and Fiberon—all of whom continue to offer innovative products.

Whether you're a do-it-yourselfer or someone who was sent by their contractor to look for materials, Sequoia's showroom can accommodate everyone.

It's all about making the experience as easy and as enjoyable as possible for homeowners. As the true outdoor living experts, Sequoia and its team are ready to help make homeowners' backyard dreams come true.

"Outdoor living has been a trend for a long time but it's hotter than ever," Keller sums up. "I think we're all ready to start spending more time outside." **H&H**

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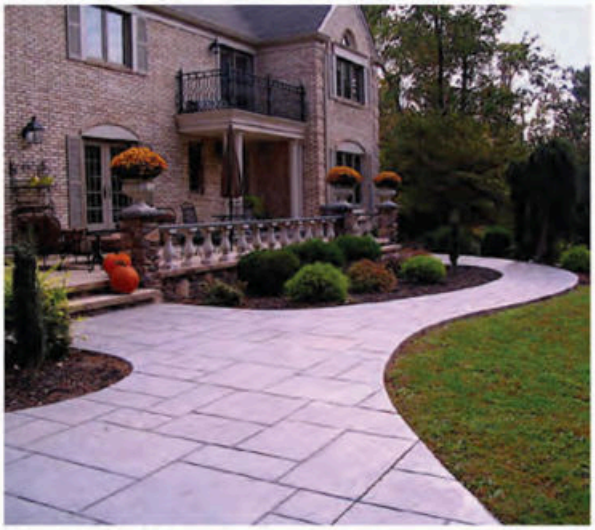


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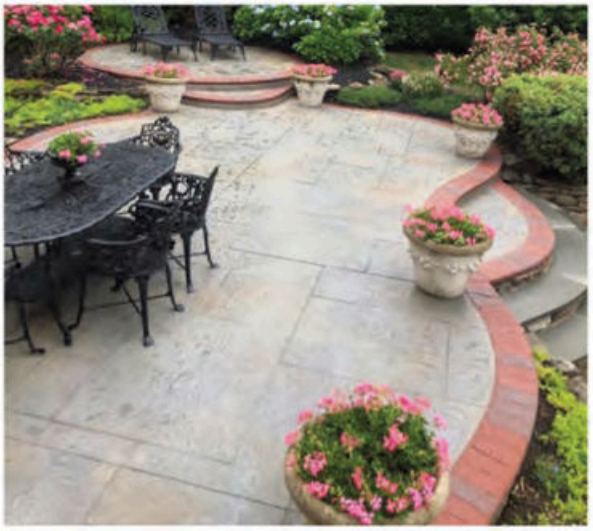
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by **LIZ HUNTER**

Crafting the perfect outdoor space is a careful orchestration combining function with aesthetics. How the space will be used determines every material installed, especially for hardscaping, and it takes an experienced industry veteran to make the best recommendations and to ensure every detail is considered.

One such consideration homeowners should make in the planning stages is the beauty and durability of decorative concrete. The product checks more boxes than you can imagine, including being low-maintenance, cost-effective and able to withstand the elements of the Mid-Atlantic. Concrete not only makes sense from a functional standpoint, but also is incredibly versatile, and can mimic nearly any material, such as flagstone, brick, tile, slate, fieldstone, cobblestone and granite pavers—at a much better price.

Working with a product like this and achieving a client's desired results comes down to expertise and technique. It's not as simple as showing up with a concrete truck and pouring a slab. There's a finesse to it, and one company in particular has built its reputation on exceeding expectations in the industry of decorative concrete: Architectural Concrete Design (ACD).

Founded in 1993 by Christopher McMahon, ACD has been the go-to company for major projects, from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Philadelphia casinos and Longwood Gardens, to malls, schools, multi-family housing developments and more. Their ability to handle projects of this size and scale truly sets ACD apart in the residential space.

Clients have access to a comprehensive team that includes designers, foremen with over 100 years of collective experience and office staff dedicated to the process. Steve Abel recently joined the company as vice president of business operations and says the diverse backgrounds of the team members contribute to the customer experience.

"We have an eclectic team, like myself who comes from a commercial banking background. We have designers with experience in interior architectural design and landscape architecture. We all bring a unique approach to the industry and our customers," Abel says. "We are obsessing about the customer experience. When customers call us, they can reach the right people on the phone.

"That has contributed to our high referral rate. Our installers are the best in the business and, if and when an issue arises, we're there to handle it."

From the initial design to installation, there are quality checks in place to ensure a customer has the most functional design for the space, he continues. "Not only are our designers looking out for any potential concerns in the process, but the installers have 25 years' experience and have seen nearly every imaginable circumstance. They are the final layer to make sure nothing was missed," Abel says.

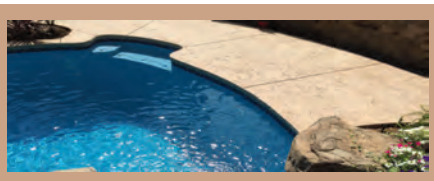
Concrete is unique in the sense that it can truly go as far as an installer can take it. "There is a wide range of approaches to making concrete look decorative, from applying stains and dyes, to using color hardeners, or coloring the concrete integrally. When done correctly, these various techniques can allow for concrete to stand out as a showpiece or incorporate surrounding colors and textures into the slab to complement existing stone, stucco or siding. The materials have certainly advanced over the years which makes the design possibilities even more expansive," says Abel.

"However, we truly believe the real secret sauce is the expertise of the installers," he continues.

It's something clients notice as well, including Bob Nonemaker, founder of OuterSpaces Inc., a high-end landscape architect. "Concrete is one of those things where if everything doesn't go right, it can end up really wrong, but with ACD, it's like a ballet for them," he says. "They know exactly what they're doing and they have tremendous productivity. It's pretty much impossible to find a flaw. They're just really good at what they do."

Abel says, in the residential space, the appeal and practicality of decorative concrete comes down to quality, value and maintenance. "It's the perfect low-maintenance complement to a well-manicured home. Time is scarcer than ever, and our customers continuously find the maintenance of natural stone to be either cost prohibitive or time consuming. This makes decorative concrete the perfect material for them."

Another benefit to using ACD is that their product is readily available. "Unfortunately, due to global supply chain issues, you will find pavers and natural stone difficult to come by these days. Prices change monthly and the availability of the product seems to change by the minute. We have found ourselves insulated from most of these issues," Abel says. "We work with several suppliers in our service area who have moved mountains to keep their product available. This enables us to be there for our clients, which in today's market is very appealing." **H&H**



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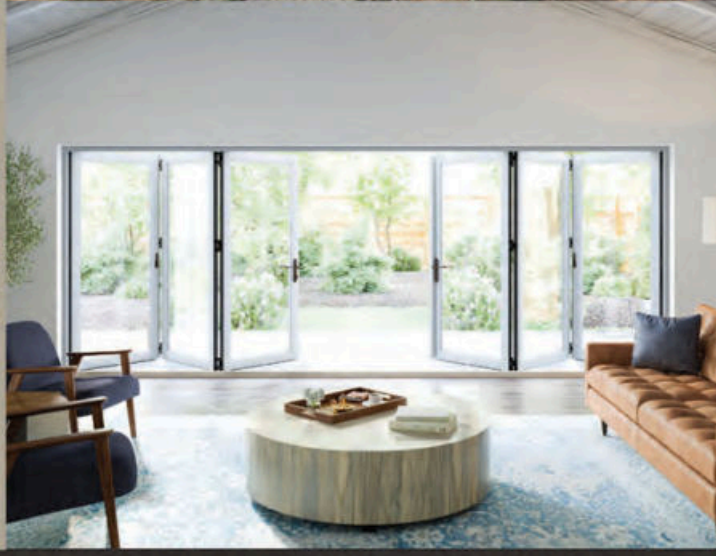
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Owner Dan Dilworth ensures that throughout the entire project, he and his team will provide personalized care to ensure a stress-free process. *House & Home* spoke with Dilworth to learn more about their signature process and the ins and outs of home renovations.

HOW IS YOUR COMPANY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER KITCHEN/BATH DESIGN COMPANIES?

We start the project with an in-home visit to listen to the client in order to get their goals and wish list for their new kitchen or bathroom. We will then invite the client to visit our 3,000-square-foot showroom where we can showcase their project on the screen using 3D imaging and walk through the showroom to help show what their new space will look like.

Once selections are made, our cabinetmakers get to work while the rest of the materials needed are gathered in our warehouse. Then the in-home construction begins and we introduce the client to their team of craftsmen who will remodel their home. When you entrust Dilworth's with your home renovation, there is only one call to make to communicate the details of the project from start to finish.

WHAT TYPE OF EXPERIENCE DOES A HOMEOWNER RECEIVE WHEN DEALING WITH YOU FROM THE INITIAL POINT OF ESTIMATE/DESIGN TO THE PROJECT'S COMPLETION?

Many express their concerns about extensive home renovation projects. We have had many clients tell us we helped make it such an enjoyable, stress-free environment from the planning in the showroom through the selection process and all the way through the construction phase.

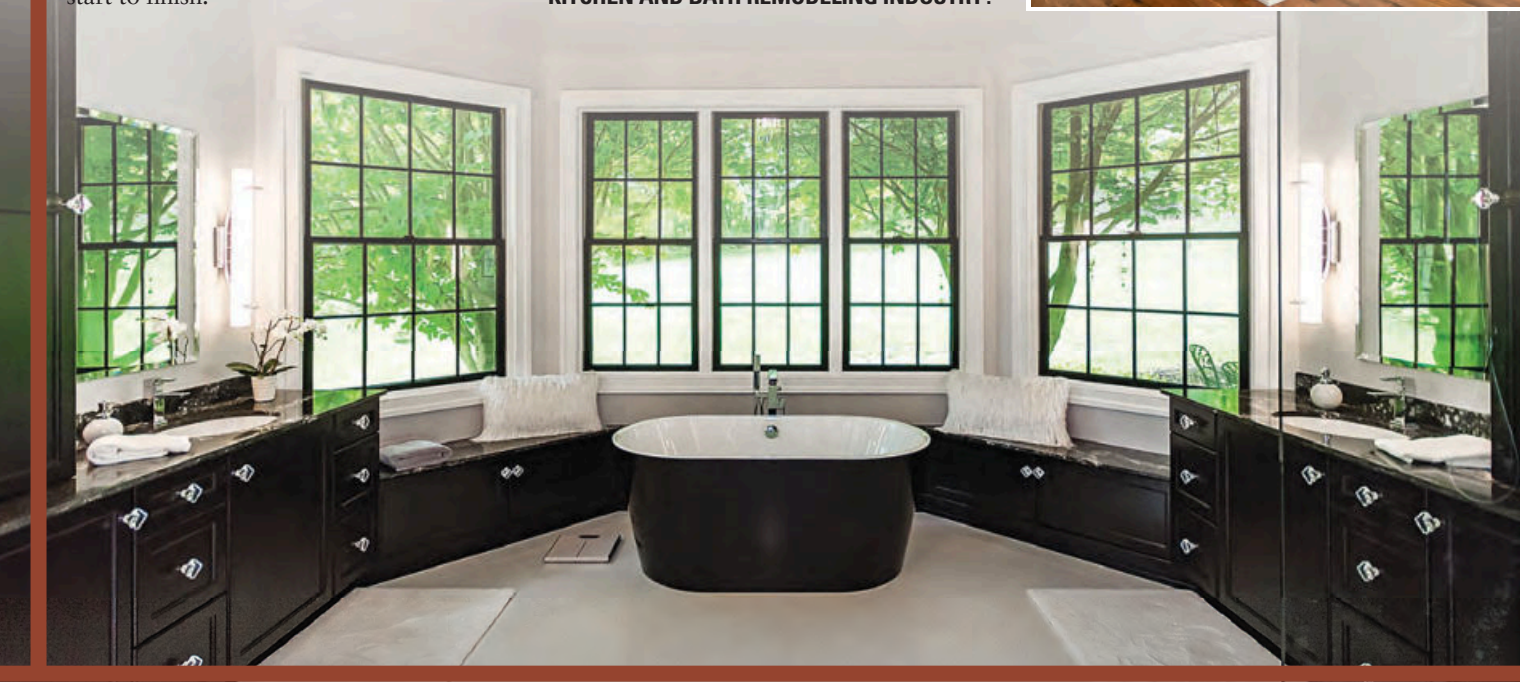
A kitchen project can last anywhere from 4-8 weeks and a bathroom project can be from 2-6 weeks depending on the renovations. Our goal is to get the project done as efficiently as possible, maintaining a high level of quality while doing our best to accommodate the homeowner's needs.

WHAT NEW TRENDS ARE HAPPENING IN THE KITCHEN AND BATH REMODELING INDUSTRY?

Styles change, sometimes as fast as the seasons. For kitchens, painted white cabinets with hardwood floors have been the trend for several years. For some, Hale Navy or Sweet Basil provides a bold pop of color, yet others choose subtle hues of Alabaster or Agreeable Grey to provide the warmth and calm that is desired.

Many are choosing to paint most of the cabinets and then add dark walnut or natural quarter-sawn white oak accents to make it their own. For bathrooms, bigger is better. Folks are leaning toward larger-sized wall and floor tiles with a curb-less walk-in shower. If there is enough space, a free-standing tub with high arch filler helps create a relaxing oasis far from the rat race that is our lives. H&H





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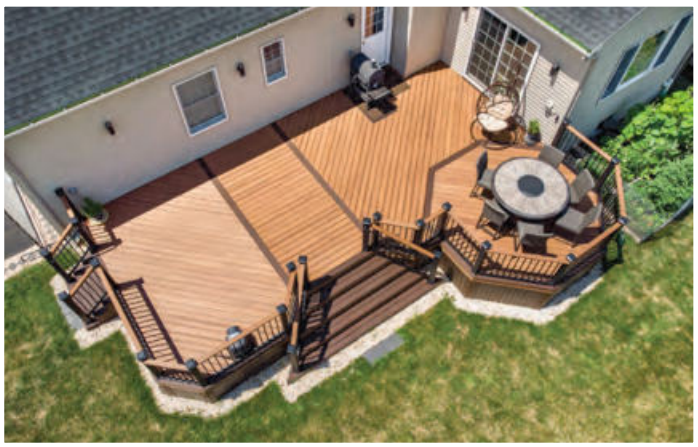
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STACKING THE DECK



Creating the perfect backyard space takes careful planning and research into the best materials, the trends that will have staying power and the amenities that will truly enhance the outdoor experience. *by* **Matt Cosentino**

Spring's arrival and the promise of warmer weather means that deck season is right around the corner. Soon enough, friends and relatives will be catching up in the backyard over an adult beverage or two and outdoor kitchens will be fired up to feed the guests at a summer barbecue, and although visitors may marvel at the craftsmanship and special features of the space during these gatherings, rarely will they think about the attention to detail that went into the finished product they are enjoying.

The truth is that designing and constructing a deck that will give the homeowners an outdoor area to cherish for years to come takes extensive planning and serious consideration about a number of questions. From materials to colors, unique shapes to multiple levels, and must-have amenities to those that are probably an unnecessary luxury, sometimes all of the concerns that must be addressed can be overwhelming.

That's where an experienced deck contractor—who has likely run into every kind of situation under the sun—can step in and be of major assistance. *House & Home* spoke to several local experts to get their insight into the process and their tips for creating a backyard oasis.

COMPOSITE VS. WOOD

There was a time when most backyard decks were built with pressure-treated wood, and even as composite materials skyrocketed in popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were still sentimental homeowners who went with wood because of the lower cost associated with it or just because they preferred the look to the still-developing synthetic market.

Recently, however, the low

maintenance, along with the improved aesthetics and more affordable pricing now being offered by the leading composite manufacturers, have just about made wood decks obsolete.

"In the past three or four years, I would say 99% of the decks being built are using synthetic products," says Jack Cameron, a designer at Deck Guardian. "There is a lot of variety as far as the brands and the qualities and properties the materials have, but everybody is doing synthetic materials, no wood. Some people are looking for entry-level and some are looking for the best out there, and there are boards that will do the job for everybody. People just need to educate themselves on what, how and when."

Ray Ebersol of Decks R Us adds that the most recent surge for wood decks eventually declined because the materials became too costly.

"Five, six, seven years ago, it was kind of a cool thing to do exotic hardwoods—ipe was a big one, which is Brazilian walnut," he says. "But that's kind of faded out because it got so expensive with shipping and everything. It's priced out of the market for most people."

Randall Yoder, a designer with Keystone Custom Decks, has some clients who ask about vinyl, but in general the company steers them toward composite decks, which account for 95% of their projects.

"There are a lot of different levels [of composites]," he says. "The higher-end option is a lot more durable over time and prone to less fading. Sometimes with the lower-end composites, if it's poorly made there will be a lot of fading."

It's important for contractors to ascertain the lifestyle of the homeowners and then helping them determine the best materials for the job. Those who entertain often, for example, may want to go the extra mile.

"Obviously, some people can spend $50,000 on a deck and some people only have $10,000 to spend on a deck, and materials can make or break the deal in some cases," Cameron says. "We have boards that are entry-level, boards that are mid-range and boards that are high-end. It's all over the place when it comes to synthetic products these days.

"The biggest [advantages to higher-end boards] would be longevity, look and performance with high traffic. The entry-level board is not for somebody who's going to have 20 people on the deck every day, running up and down the stairs and all of that. It's for somebody who wants to sip a glass of wine over the weekend and not abuse the deck too much. For high-traffic areas you need a more durable board that won't get so much wear and tear over time."

As Ebersol points out, the higher-end composites will cost more now, but in the long run might actually save the customer money compared to less expensive vinyl-wrapped composites, which he notes come with a 25-year warranty and fewer color options.

"The higher-ends, the solid vinyl boards from an Azek or Wolf, they have a lifetime warranty and there's a lot more color selection," he says. "We like those materials because they're easier to install and they're nicer to work with. It's almost just a price point—do you want to spend the money for Azek and get a lifetime warranty so you'll probably never have to worry about it? Or do you want to save yourself some money now and go with something that's not going to look as nice? It's going to move a little bit more when you walk over it and you're going to be able to tell that it's not the same quality."

COLORS AND OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As for the most popular colors, there has been a major shift since composite decking first broke into the mainstream.

"Everybody is looking for lighter colors that don't get as hot on your feet when you're outside," Cameron says. "Ten years ago, people were just looking for dark chocolate colors and dark grays, and then everybody realized that those get too hot in the sun. Now manufacturers and homeowners are all shifting gears to light, neutral colors that perform much better under the sun."

Ebersol still sees some demand for darker browns and grays, but

Image top left courtesy of Keystone Custom Decks. Image below courtesy of Deck Guardian





H&H DECKS

one trend coming on strong is the two-toned deck, which will feature boards of varying colors.

"We do a lot of those," he says. "The main floor will be in one color and the border will typically be a darker color. Sometimes it's a darker floor and lighter border, but I would say probably 90% of the time it's the lighter color in the middle and the darker color on the border."

Some projects seamlessly work in multiple kinds of materials, especially the resort-style spaces that may include a composite deck with a roof overhead and a fireplace.

"For the interior of the roof, we use our own products and it's a cedar," Yoder says. "We do our own custom blends and stains and it works well for us. PVC is also very popular at the moment. Masonry on our projects is also very big, and I feel that's what sets us apart. The columns, fireplaces and outdoor kitchen areas stand out. Everyone wants to be at home right now, so more and more they want to bring indoor space to the outdoors."

MAKING A STATEMENT

While a majority of decks remain rectangular or square, there are designs that stand out by bending boards and incorporating circles.

"It's mainly aesthetic and there are some pros to it as well," Yoder says. "Little bump-outs help out for bar areas, so you can still get some extra dining behind it. We have our own guys who bend the boards, so that kind of sets us apart because we can do it all in house."

"Our designs are unique," adds Bill Wilson, one of the owners of Amazing Decks. "We do a lot of curves—we have the equipment to curve boards, so a lot of our decks are free-flowing curves. We also integrate other materials, like paver patios or bluestone. Maybe the backyard doesn't just call for a deck; maybe it calls for a combination of the two. Even though we're a deck company, we have to be honest with the customer and tell them what will work best."

Ebersol still gets requests for round areas of the deck but it is starting to be few and far between.

"That little fad kind of faded out," he says. "We just finished a pretty large project that had a circle front, but it's not as popular as it once was. We still do a handful a year, maybe even a dozen, but not like we used to."

Another trend that was hot for a few years but has cooled off is the multi-level deck. It may lead to "oohs" and "ahs" when guests first lay eyes on it, and it will certainly look spectacular on Instagram, but for practical, everyday use it can be a safety issue. As Cameron points out, that is especially true when parties are occurring and people are enjoying alcohol on the deck.

"Most people settle on a single level just because they have more flexibility when joining two or three tables together for a large gathering rather than having three corners where people are separated," he says. "Also, multi-level decks were popular back in the day but people realized that after you get a couple of drinks in, you're walking backwards and before you know it you're flipping upside down.

"So now people are more conscious of a single level being much safer. We still do some multi-level but not to the extent that it used to be, when we would do as many as four levels on a deck. The maximum someone would do now is two levels—the dining and lounging on one level and then the cooking and bar area on the other."

Another way to show off decorative flair is through the railings, which can have functional uses as well.

"The most popular railing requests we get are the flat-top drink railing options," says Mike Jerminski of Get Decked. "We take the same material used on the decking and place it on top of railing to provide a nice, flat, 6-inch surface perfect for drinks, bird feeders, etc. Also, the aluminum square balusters used vertically are a great architectural look that combines a sleek, see-through modern design that is still fully code compliant."

Finally, LED lights have become almost a must-have, and can be used in several areas of the deck to provide



not only safety but ambiance.

"In the last few years, we have installed lights on almost every single deck that we do," Cameron says. "It used to be a commodity, and now it's just part of it—when people get a deck, they automatically think about lights. In some states across the U.S., having lights on the stairs is actually code required. In New Jersey it is not, but people understand that having lights is really going to save people from tripping. At the same time, in the evening it creates a really nice resort-style, laidback atmosphere because the lights are not too bright in your face, but you can turn off the overhead lights and have the low-voltage ones while you're enjoying dinner or a glass of wine."

"The LED lighting has become way more affordable and lasts a lot longer than the old lights did," Ebersol adds. "Probably 80% of the decks we build have lights on them, maybe even more. Typically it's on the side of the posts, about 6 to 8 inches down from the top of the railing. That's almost like a triangle-shaped light and it will shine down toward the deck floor. And then we'll put them on the risers of the stairs pointing down so it shines on the tread where you're stepping as you're walking up the stairs. Those are the two most typical locations; we do post-top lights sometimes as well."

SPECIAL FEATURES

Fully loaded decks featuring outdoor kitchens, bars and entertainment areas with televisions may not be quite as in demand as a few years ago as a result of concerns over the economy, but these amenities are still popular for those who can afford them.

"It's been affected a little bit, but for the most part, most people know what they're getting into," Yoder says. "As designers, the big thing is setting expectations ahead of time and making sure the clients are aware of the costs going into it. Just a couple of years ago, everybody wanted to add on, add on, add on. It has taken a step back a little bit, but we are still doing those extras if we set expectations correctly."

Some form of protection from the elements is also beneficial, although Cameron gives a word of caution.

"Pergolas are not going to do much other than decorate the deck," he says. "But people who are serious about using the space outside need a roof, because it's either too hot or it's drizzling, so you never get the perfect weather outside. A lot of people are using the roof so they can have shade or protection. Those things have really good ROI unlike a pergola, which only gives you the look. Having a roof over your deck is almost like an addition to your house and you get 85% return on it."

In the end, homeowner heeding the advice of experienced designers and builders when it comes to materials, colors, trends and amenities will usually be thrilled with the final results.

"It's great for both us and them to see a project come to life," Yoder says. "You see the pictures that get posted by the families and you create a relationship with them. It's a lot of fun and very rewarding." H&H

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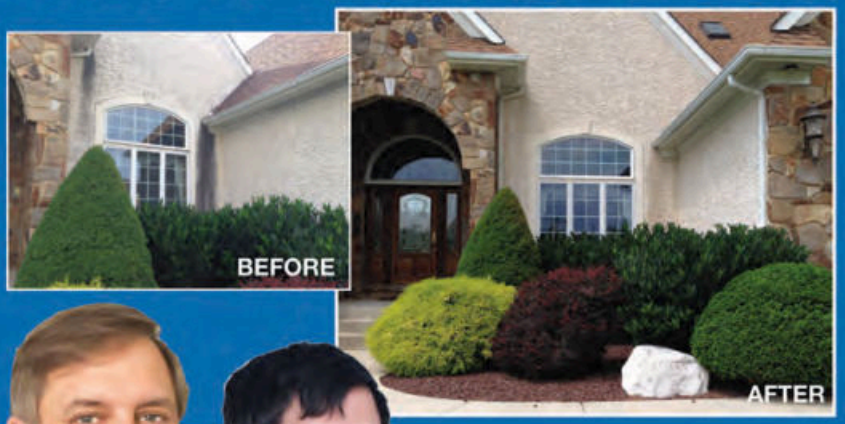
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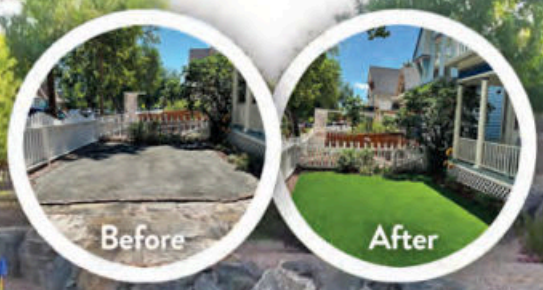
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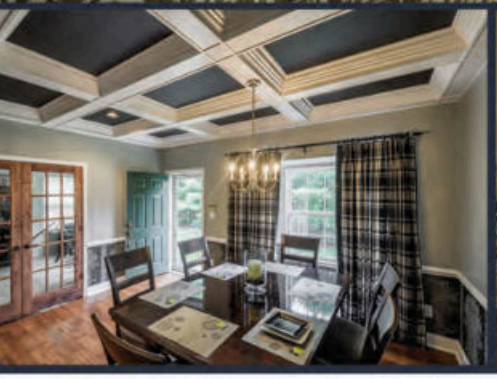
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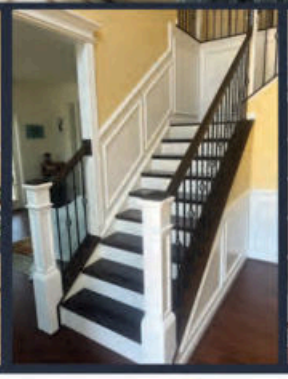
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