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Volume 22, Issue 8

Architectural Concrete Design

Bringing unmatched expertise and a designer's eye to decorative concrete projects *page 21*

ASK THE EXPERT



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Cosmos Marble and Granite

A family-owned business who guides customers through every step of their dream project *page 23*

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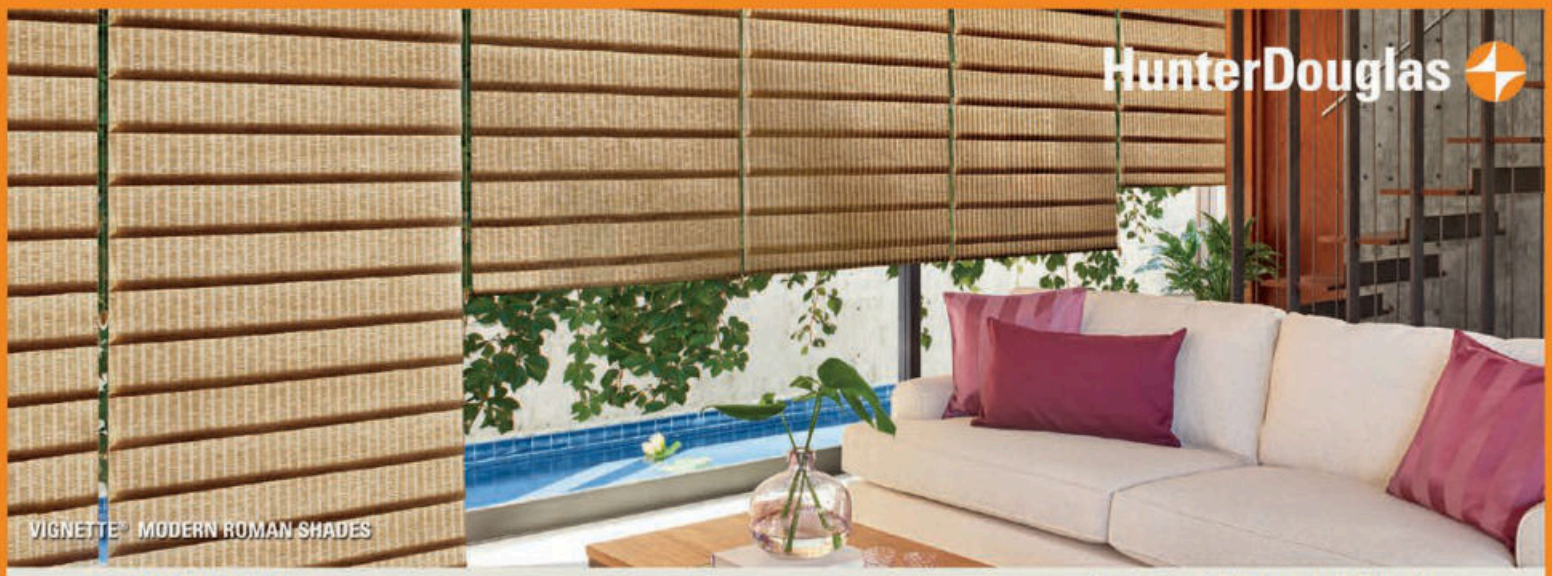
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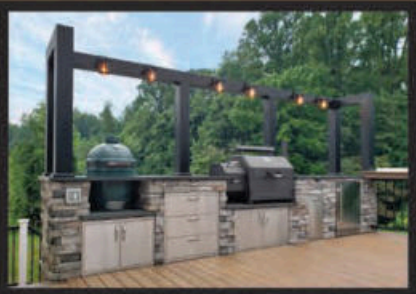
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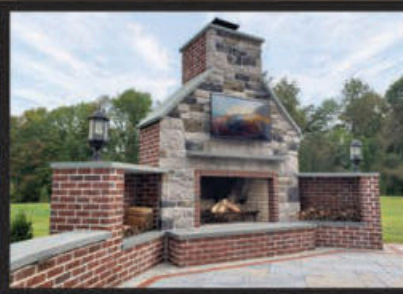
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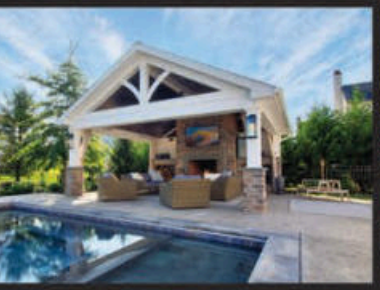
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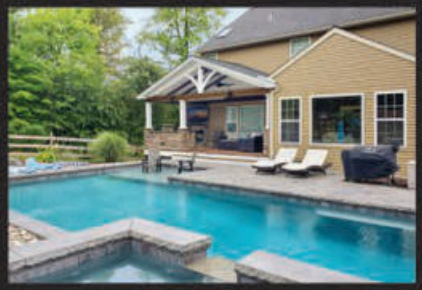
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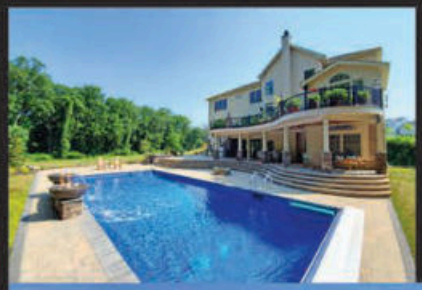
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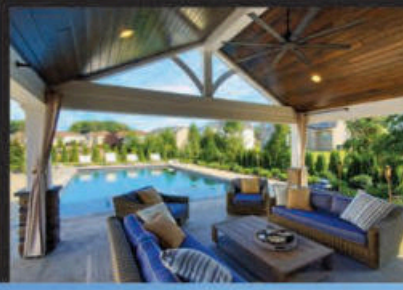
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Take it Outside

Now that you've redone your deck, added an outdoor kitchen and created the backyard oasis you've always dreamed of, it's time to find

the perfectly appointed accessories

to accent the exterior extension of your indoor décor.

By Madeleine Maccar

For the past two years, homeowners have been looking at their indoor and outdoor spaces with a renewed focus on making their houses feel more like a home that reflects their unique tastes and lifestyles. Rather than letting the walls close in, the pandemic has been an unexpected opportunity to assess your living spaces with a fresh perspective and clear vision of everything from simple refreshes to timely renovations and full-scale remodels.

Even as the region looks ahead to resuming long-delayed summer traditions like those much-needed getaways and sorely missed plans with loved ones, home improvement projects that extend all the comfort of the indoors to the outside are still on the agenda for many. And with all those new color schemes, new fixtures and new materials comes the accompanying new accessories that amplify their wow factor.

"The residual effects of the pandemic will be felt for some time—it is not like flipping a switch," says Craig Friedman of XO Appliances. "Since the pandemic, we have seen a higher priority given to enhancing spaces within the home or placing a greater emphasis on enjoying our backyards with outdoor cooking appliances."

"Outdoor dining is still blowing up," agrees Kristi Reading of The Buxton Complex. "It's not your standard picnic table: It's the nice, comfortable chairs, beautiful tables, all these different colors, and coordinating all that with your patio."

Whether you're looking for all-new items that complement your newly customized outdoor oasis or the one statement piece that will make your backyard pop, the region's experts know exactly how to help make your dreams a well-appointed reality.

Your Space, Your Taste

While some design trends of the past have erred toward the year's it-color or the must-have appointment of the seasons, personal tastes have been the real driving factor recently.

"We aren't seeing a singular specific look or product category that is outperforming another," says Bobby Huber Jr. of Oskar Huber Furniture & Design. "Each person's outdoor space is unique—be it the layout, how they want the space to function or what their design preferences/styles are."

"Individual tastes and the nature of people's homes are key drivers, but in general, there is a move to expand the home by utilizing their outdoor living space more completely," adds Friedman. "With more outdoor appliance options available, backyards are becoming a home for fire pits/tables and pizza ovens,



Image at left courtesy of Oscar Huber Furniture & Design. Image at right courtesy of The Buxton Complex

Take it Outside

as well as full outdoor kitchens."

But there are always those items making such a splash that everyone seems to be clamoring for them.

"The hottest accessories, besides cantilever and market umbrellas, have been fire pit tables and drink coolers, and we are selling some serving carts on wheels as well," adds Bruce Halpern, owner of Tropicraft by Pavillon du Soleil. "These all add to the fun of being outside. And keeping people outside adds to the convenience of the host."

"The most popular thing we have going on right now is landscape speaker systems, which are basically a combination of multiple little satellite speakers that almost looks like outdoor lights, then you bury an 8-inch, 10-inch or 12-inch subwoofer, and it gives you a really clear, full range of sound," adds Gregg Maina of Elite Smart Home, who says it's a product that largely gets installed at new-construction homes but is a comparatively easy retrofit for homeowners looking to upgrade their backyard's wireless sound system for the summer.

With outdoor accessories and furniture being more exposed to the elements than their indoor counterparts, experts advise looking for durable pieces that are built to withstand seasons of exposure.

"In outdoor furniture, the polycomposites are a fantastic investment," Reading says. "They're no-maintenance, they don't splinter, they last forever and you can get them in all kinds of colors."

Huber notes that there are plenty of sturdy, aesthetically pleasing and even environmentally friendly materials for customers to choose from as they're selecting patio furniture: recycled poly lumber looks and feels like wood, and is guaranteed not to crack, splinter, chip, peel or rot for 20 years; cast aluminum is a superior-grade, molten aluminum alloy hand-poured into detailed moldings; wrought aluminum is reinforced at the piece's stress points for extra resiliency; faux wicker is both realistic and guaranteed to not change color for at least five years; and teak, which comes in both a natural finish and one that mimics the gray patina it develops with age.



"When it comes to cushions and fabrics, not all are created equal," he continues. "It's important to know you're buying something with a top-quality cushion."

Halpern, too, notes that comfort is king.

"The No. 1 thing, in our opinion, is comfort," he emphasizes. "If it's comfortable, you will want to sit there instead of staying inside. … Don't think of your outside furniture as being any less important than your living room [since] you will use it nearly half of the year."

"What I have heard is customers coming in saying they want something that is going to last, be comfortable, look good and can have delivered ASAP," Huber adds.

Shore-to-Please Accessories

Shore homes have been enjoying their share of upgrades and reimagined exterior appointments, too, especially as the rising popularity of working from home has encouraged many families to spend more time at their Shore houses and secondary properties.

But that salty air does do a number on certain materials, and will age your outdoor accessories faster than more inland locales will.

"At the Shore, if you don't want to spend your time doing maintenance on your furniture, stick with quality aluminum, cast or extruded, that is heavy and has a finish that's guaranteed—never buy 'metal' or 'steel' furniture, it won't hold up," Halpern points out. "The many MGP (marine grade polymer) USA-made brands like Telescope, Windward or HomeCrest will endure any weather thrown at it."

Huber agrees that MGP—"the same materials they use on boats"—is made to endure the harsh salt air. "It is a refined look that offers a wide range of colors."

As Shore homes tend to be built a little closer together than primary residences, Maina notes that the landscape speakers "stay local" since they're positioned so low, meaning that you enjoy your music without imposing on your neighbors.

"You're putting anywhere from eight to 16 speakers all around your yard, so you don't have to blast your music to hear it," he says.

With many people spending more time at their Shore houses, both for a change of scenery while working from home and to get away without going far away, people are beginning to personalize their seaside residences more like their primary ones.

"Remote is no longer remote: What was



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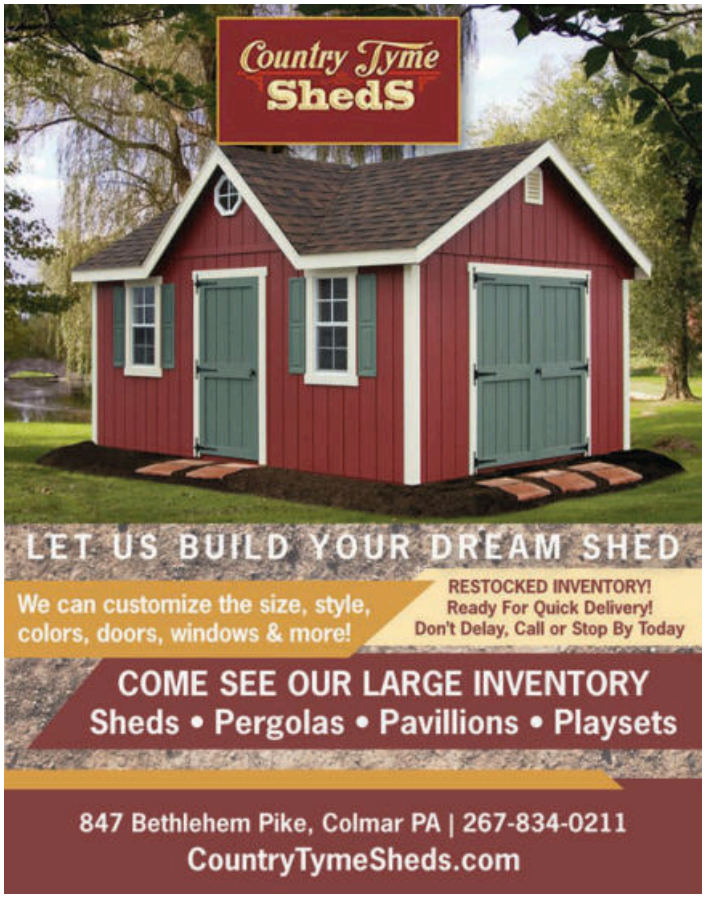




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Take it Outside

once thought of as a place to escape to has become the place we expand to, and comfort is the key regardless of the physical address," Friedman says.

Here to Help

While accessorizing your outdoor space isn't as high-stakes a project as home renovations and additions, area experts do have the insights, experience and dedicated team members to point you toward the right items, brands, colors, materials and more, plus the customer feedback they've received from previous buyers as well as their own experience with an item.

"It's really important that you work with someone who knows the product, who isn't just a salesman," Reading points out. "We all have our products in our homes, so I can tell you about a certain piece that I've had since 2006, and that it doesn't change colors or fade and how it's held up through the years."

Besides, testing out and examining accessories and pieces of furniture before you commit to them is how you avoid making potentially pricey mistakes or finding yourself saddled with an item that you're less than thrilled with.

"The only way to know if something is comfortable is to try it out—that's why we insist on having more than 100 different sets on the showroom floor," Halpern says. "Yes, it takes time to try them out, but it's worth it every day you're on your patio or deck, and it will be worth it for decades to come."

For backyard accessories that might come with a bit of a learning curve, showrooms not only offer expert demonstrations from knowledgeable staff but also can kick-start some inspiration.

"A lot of this stuff people have never heard of until they see it at someone else's house, so [a showroom] is a good place to show people all the different aspects of a product," Maina explains. "It's hard for me to explain what a smart home is, but if I demonstrate it, it starts clicking and people start realizing, 'I can do this, I can do that.' It's a great place to spur ideas."

As colors on a screen aren't always true to life and a material that seems like it would fit your outdoor décor might clash up close, visiting a showroom for an in-person, hands-on assessment of all your options is still the best way to decide what furniture and flourishes are most harmonious with your space.

"One thing that our designers can do today that they couldn't easily do five years ago is now we can continue your interior design aesthetic to the outdoor space," Huber says. "This helps create a connected look to the rest of your home that shows the cohesive design expression of the client inside and outside their home." **H&H**

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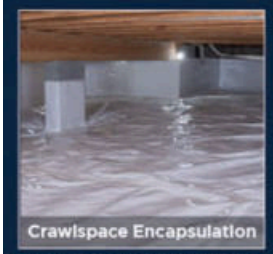
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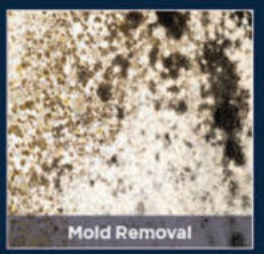
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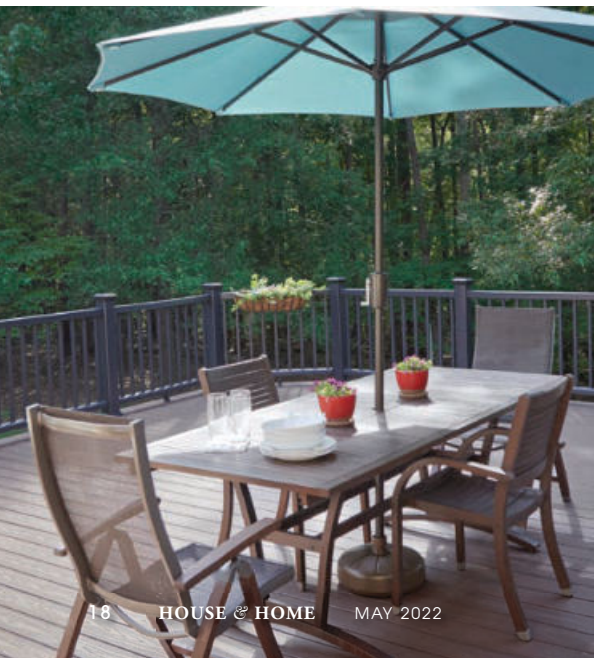
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by **Lindsey Getz**



Set Up Your Space for Summer

At **Sequoia Out Back**, customers can find endless inspiration for their outdoor dreams.



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.

Pair these gorgeous displays with the knowledgeable and helpful team members who are ready to assist—and homeowners can really appreciate the showroom visit



[H]ere, 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."

—John Keller, *owner*

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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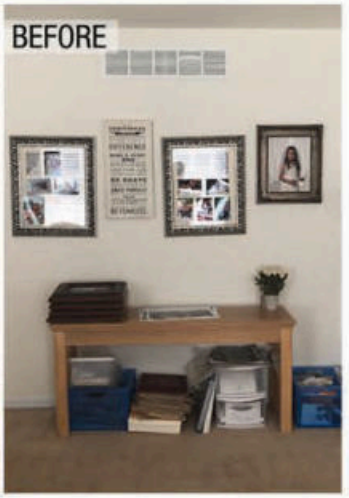


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Breaking the Mold

Architectural Concrete Design brings unmatched expertise and a designer's eye to your decorative concrete projects. 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. Not only does it make sense from a functional standpoint, concrete 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).

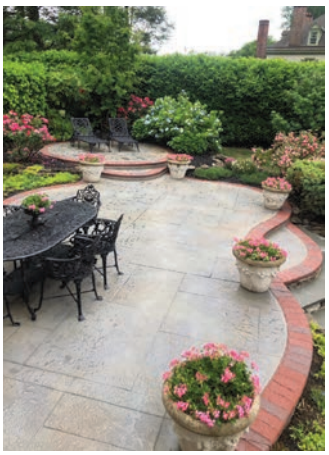
Founded in 1993 by Christopher McMahon, ACD has been the go-to company for major projects, from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Philadelphia casinos and Longwood Gardens, to malls, schools, multi-family housing developments and more. Their ability to handle projects of this size and scale truly sets ACD apart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

With summer approaching, 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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FAMILY-OWNED COSMOS MARBLE AND GRANITE STANDS BY CUSTOMERS THROUGH EVERY STEP OF AN INSTALLATION OR REMODELING PROJECT. *by* Amanda Hamm Hengel

When it comes to bath and kitchen installation and remodels, quartz is the hot item these days. Popular for its non-porous characteristics and minimal maintenance requirements, Noula Karagiorgos, who leads business development for Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania-based Cosmos Marble and Granite, says it tops the list of requested products. Quartzite and granite run a close second and third, but Karagiorgos says Cosmos now offers a product that may give all three a run for their money: porcelain.

"Porcelain is unique because it doesn't require any sealing like natural stone, and it has no heat limitation like quartz," she explains. "The porcelain countertops look like real marble, and there is no maintenance for it."

Cosmos has been certified to fabricate and install porcelain countertops for a year and a half—and is one of the few stone fabricators in the area certified to do so—and Karagiorgos says its popularity has truly taken off.

While porcelain is just starting to make its way into homes, Cosmos has been a known and trusted fabricator and installer in Huntington Valley and the surrounding areas since 1993. Family owned and operated, the company specializes in the cutting and fabrication of stone countertops, but their work is not limited to these parameters.

Projects including flooring, outdoor dining and fireplace surrounds are also part of their offerings, all of which can be done in both residential and commercial settings.

"Basically, anything you can put a countertop on, we can do," Karagiorgos notes. "Vanities, small shower pieces, shower benches. … We can do it all."

Another project customers have been requesting is a full-height backsplash, says Karagiorgos. Rather than being tiled, the backsplash is a continuation of the countertop, so there are no grout lines, and the wall becomes a stunning statement piece.

While it may be pricier to do a full-height backsplash, Karagiorgos says Cosmos has a rich in-stock inventory with products—including granite, quartz, quartzite and porcelain—to cover any budget. They also have a remnant yard where customers can find smaller pieces for parts of their project at a third of the cost, and they carry a huge supply of tile and mosaics for backsplash, wall and floor tile applications.

When it comes to the design and installation of the products, Cosmos also uses the latest technology to ensure proper cut and fit each time.

"We use a CNC cutting machine to do everything digitally," Karagiorgos says. "When we come in to a customer's home, we do a template with a laser.

"All the information is fed in to the machine digitally," she continues. "There is minimal human involvement to avoid errors."

When it comes to placing the product, all Cosmos installers have been certified for at least 10-15 years, and Cosmos prides itself on offering the most professional and experienced installation available.

This attention to detail, and commitment to customer service, is a cornerstone Cosmos has built its business on. Taking on a new installation or remodel can be time consuming and costly, and Cosmos understands this. That's why they are there to help through every step of the process, and to ensure every customer can feel as though their project is completed with the best materials and professionals available.

"These types of projects can be a lot of money for some people," Karagiorgos concludes. "We want them to know we care about them and we take the time to educate them on the product to make sure they get what they're looking for. We think it means a lot to them, and it means a lot to us." **H&H**



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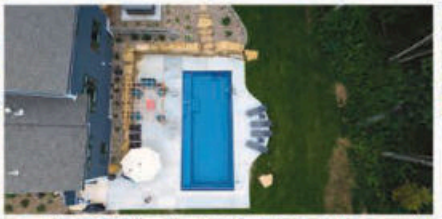
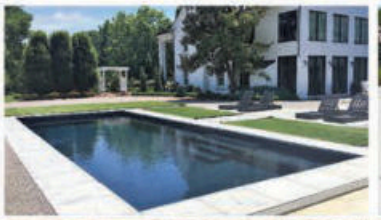


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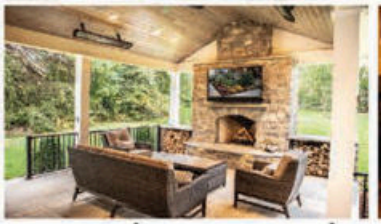
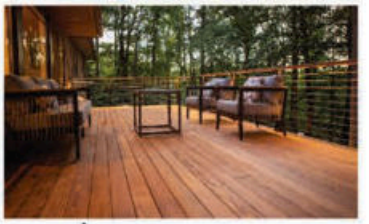
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TAKING KEY STEPS NOW will have your landscaping looking its best when summer arrives.

Always be *Prepared*

by **Matt Cosentino**

Entertainment season is fast approaching, and before long homeowners will be welcoming in guests for summer barbecues and pool parties. They will surely want a yard to be proud of on these occasions, and even when there is not a special event going on, pulling into the driveway and admiring a lush, green lawn does wonders for mental health. Of course, the extreme heat of July and August can put a tremendous strain on the landscaping, which is why it is crucial for homeowners to take certain steps in the spring to ensure that they and any visitors will have a beautiful property to look at all summer long.

"You have to prepare right now with fertilization, seeding and really getting it ready to be able to take on the heat in the summer," says Michael Tarleton of TLC Landscaping. "The optimal time for growing seed is the fall, but you also have to maintain what you have and keep it where it is."

Adds Michael Pasquarello of Elite Landscaping: "Spring is the ideal time to thicken up the density of a lawn and to establish a deep root system so come summer when evapotranspiration is at its highest, the individual blades of grass can survive on less available moisture."

House & Home spoke to several local professionals to find out some helpful tips about preparing the lawn, flowers and planting beds for the harsh summer months to come.

Get a lay of the land

An important stage in the spring cleanup process is to assess the yard and see what kind of shape it is in heading into summer.

"My first suggestion would be to walk around the property and inspect your plants and your garden for any dead plant material and any dead growth on the plant material," says Chris DeMato of Rock Bottom Landscaping & Fencing. "If you have any other structures or fences or things like that, inspect everything and get a good list of what you need. Of course, you can decide what you can manage or if you need a professional to come in and take care of it.

"The next step, assuming you have dead growth, broken branches and plants that do not look well, is those portions of the plant need to be pruned off and cleaned up. Any ornamental grasses or other plants that were not cut back in the fall should be cut back before the summer season. Obviously, clean out your planting beds of any weed growth and any undesirable grass growth that has spread into the planting bed."

Often, dead leaves that were not removed during the fall have gathered in clumps around the yard and can be a hindrance to the spring awakening.

"It's very important to clean leaves thoroughly," DeMato says. "Allowing leaves to form in a planting bed or your grass can create a covered mat when they harden and settle. They essentially smother whatever they're laying on. If they're on the lawn, they're going to kill the grass, and if they're on the plant, they will smother the plant."

Do's and don'ts heading into summer

After a rough winter, there is an inclination for many homeowners to rush out the first mild weekend of the spring and immediately start thatching, aerating and seeding. But it's



Photos courtesy of TLC Landscaping

not always necessary.

"The fall is a more popular time to perform these tasks, however they can be beneficial to complete in the spring as well if they have not been done in a while," Pasquarello says. "Seeding is the one item I would definitely wait until the fall as you will be competing directly with any pre-emergents applied to the lawn. They will adversely affect the grass seeds in the same way as they do the weed seeds."

DeMato advises to not get carried away with fertilizing. Too much fertilization can actually result in less growth and leave grass and plants vulnerable to pests or disease.

"Homeowners tend to overfertilize a lot," he says. "Overfertilizing your plants and your lawn is not good; it's essentially no different than a human being overeating. You're not allowing those plants and the grass to strengthen on their own from the ground up. They don't have to search for a whole lot because you're overfeeding them."

Mulching planting beds is always a common chore in the spring, and local big-box stores and garden centers will often have sales on mulch at this time of the year. Tarleton warns to be careful about not going overboard.

"Basically, I always say clean it up, weed it and mulch it," he explains. "This way the mulch will help absorb the water and retain the water. But don't overmulch—mulch is there to help your plants, but too much mulch will kill your plants."

DeMato adds that cultivating the soil is also important. "Essentially, you take a heavy, metal garden rake and loosen your soil and mulch," he says. "This allows plant material to get the proper watering when it rains, and it also allows oxygen to get to the root system a little easier—it aerates the soil, which is very important. Cultivating means mixing and turning over your soil with a heavy metal rake and preparing your soil for growth and to allow the





watering to seep in properly around the root system."

Addressing the lawn

Cutting the grass in the middle of the scorching summer can be a laborious activity, but many homeowners look forward to it at this time of year when it's not as hot. It's typically best to resume mowing in early spring.

"In our region, historically the second week of April is when lawns are due for their first haircut," Pasquarello says. "First, be sure to remove any leaves, branches and debris from the surface of the lawn in order to give the ability to breathe and cut freely."

"It depends on the lawn," adds Tarleton. "You don't want to let it get too long before you cut, because then it builds up thatch. But at the same time you don't want to cut too much where you're cutting it too short and burning it out. You have to base it on your lawn. Sometimes people cut too often but it's OK to take a week off here and there and let the lawn establish, and not just beat the lawn up by running a machine over it."

Because of the constant April showers that usually carry over to early May, homeowners must monitor their watering of the lawn.

"Overwatering is a big mistake," DeMato says. "It's the same concept as overfertilizing.



If you overwater a plant or your grass, it does not allow the root system to really strengthen up and search for the water on its own. So be very careful and be very regimented in your watering—it should be a scheduled watering system. It's a common mistake where a home-



owner may miss watering for three or four days when they're newly seeding a lawn, and then they water for three hours and overwater. That's the worst thing you can do, so try to be scheduled with your watering. [Do it] every other day and make sure it's the same amount of time, and the same principle with your plants."

"Most established lawns can flourish in the early to mid spring with just the help of Mother Nature," Pasquarello agrees. "The temperatures on average are still on the cooler side and the lawn is not demanding a tremendous amount of water. [But] there still have been some very dry, hot mid-May years where you will need to crank things up a bit."

DeMato concludes that homeowners know their properties best and can use their judgment about watering, with specific areas needing more water than others.

Final touches

Most homeowners have dealt with unsightly crabgrass in July and August, which can ruin a landscape that was impeccable just a few months before. Weed control is critical in the spring.

"You should be doing preventative measures now to minimize that in the summer months," Tarleton says. "It's hard when the weather gets to be 100 degrees out; it's really tough to spray for weeds then because you can kill the grass too."

DeMato shares his recommendations for perennials and ornamental grasses.

"If you have any overgrown perennials or ornamental grasses, if you feel they're too large you can divide them," he says. "That should be done prior to the summer months. You can simply split an ornamental grass down the middle and divide it and plant the other half somewhere you may have space. You can do this with many of your perennials that will be coming in during May and June.

"Quite often there are perennials that are very flimsy and the growth is wispy," he continues. "You may want to secure them with stakes and other garden rings or plant rings. You simply stake it down over the plant and it gives a little support to those flimsy plants such as peonies, mint and delphiniums. This will encourage a much stronger root system."

Finally, Pasquarello points out that spring is always a great time to add plants or flowers to the landscape.

"Planting earlier helps flowers, shrubs and trees establish a root system and get acclimated to their new area prior to the heat setting in," he says. "They will be able to uptake water more easily when needed." H&H

Photo courtesy of Elite Landscaping

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Certified Remodeler

When vetting candidates to complete a home renovation, certifications and other means of self-improvement may be telling indicators of a contractor's character.

"All men are created equal," as Thomas Jefferson famously wrote in the Declaration of Independence. The same may not necessarily apply to all home contractors.

"In Pennsylvania, all you need to become a registered contractor is a couple hundred dollars to show proof of liability insurance," says Dennis D. Gehman, MCR, the founder of Gehman Design Remodeling in Harleysville. "For most of us, our house is the biggest investment we will make in our lifetime, and we're trusting the contractors we hire to treat it with care. By and large, most contractors know what they're doing, but I wish Pennsylvania would have some kind of test to prove their competence, both on the construction side and on the business side."

As many as 50% of startups fail within five years of founding the business, according to the Small Business Administration, and Gehman suggests that number is far higher in the construction trade. In other words, a homeowner who has a problem with a renovation after the fact might be in for an unwanted surprise when they learn that the contractor who did the job is no longer around to address the issue.

So, how would a homeowner know if a particular contractor deserves their trust? Gehman suggests a contractor's efforts to obtain notable certifications may be a telling indicator. For example, he has earned Certified Remodeler, Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler, and Master Certified Remodeler designations from NARI, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

"I had 15 years of trade experience when I started this business, but I had zero business experience," Gehman recalls. "When I got the CR certification, it was a 16-week class—10 weeks focused on construction and six weeks focused on business acumen. It taught me how to read a balance sheet, what to charge, the whole hiring-and-firing side, and client management. We had been in business for two years when I earned the certification, and it definitely made a difference between being a success and being one of those statistics."

Many of Gehman's team members have become certified, too; both of his sons, for example, have earned Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler, Certified Lead Carpenter, and Certified Remodeling Project Manager designations. Gehman has since become an instructor himself, devoted to helping other contractors become certified through NARI.

NARI is not the only game in town, however. The Environmental Protection Agency requires contractors to become Certified Renovators in the use of lead-safe work practices during renovations. Likewise, a number of manufacturers provide online certifications and continuing-education tools that go beyond the scope of their proprietary products.

Gehman considers continuing education "one of the most important things a contractor can do." In this regard, he is excited about the return of in-person trade shows, where he not only learns about new products that may yield a better on-the-job outcome but also networks with fellow contractors who can share best practices. He gets similar satisfaction and education by reading industry journals such as *Fine Homebuilding* and *The Journal of Light Construction*.

"Continuing education is also a requirement for renewing many certifications," he adds. "Some continuing education is easy, like attending NARI meetings, sitting in on webinars, and reading books and trade journals. NARI also wants you to get involved with the community, whether it's the chamber of commerce, the local church, or some other way to give back. As anybody who gives back already knows, there is some work involved, but you always receive far more than you give out."

Gehman's best advice to any homeowner: "Do your due diligence before choosing a contractor." In addition to asking prospective contractors about their certifications, do not be shy about asking challenging questions that may provide a window into the contractor's character.

"We need to earn your trust before we get your business," he adds. "Ask for references. Every contractor will put you in touch with clients for jobs where everything went perfectly, but not every project goes that way. I encourage people to inquire about those projects when something goes the way it shouldn't have, and ask, 'How did Gehman handle it?' That's how you find out what kind of company you're dealing with." H&H

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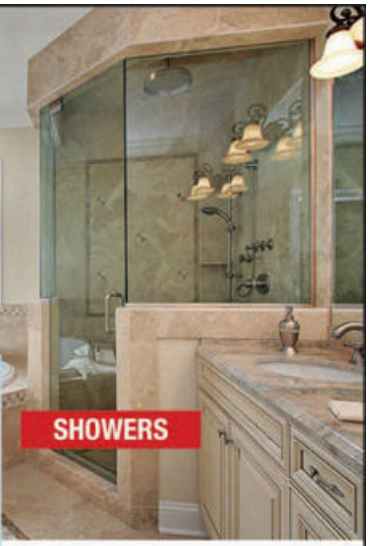
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