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## OUTDOOR LIVING

Experts discuss how to make a yard a home

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If not for her screened-in porch, Toms River interior designer Mary Alice Smith would miss out on many enjoyable evenings.

"There's no way we could sit outside," said Smith, who added a 12-by-12-foot screened-in porch to her home.

The Smiths' property fronts on woods, which lead to Cattus Island, she said. Though beautiful, she said her backyard also is plagued by bugs.

But thanks to her porch, Smith said she eats dinner outside almost every night.

"It (the porch) is one of the best things that we ever did," Smith said. "It makes you feel like you're out in the garden ... but without the sun and bugs."

Smith is not alone in discovering the advantages of outdoor rooms and living spaces.

"Outdoor rooms" — sunporches, gazebos and patios — have become popular additions to homes, landscapers and interior designers say.

"The prices of homes and prices of land is going up so high that everyone wants to use all their land," said David Olsen, owner of the Toms River company Fairwinds Landscaping.

"People want to extend their living space," agreed interior designer Jende DeCamillo, owner of the Long Beach Township company Perfect Setting.

For some homeowners, "extending their living spaces" can become a major undertaking.

The process can involve landscaping, walkways and the addition of outdoor refrigerators, sinks and grills.

"The grill is a big item," said landscape designer Bill Ball of Ball Contracting, based out of Toms River.

One of Ball's clients went so far as to install a fireplace, a hot tub and a pond, Ball said.

Ball's clients have paid anywhere from \$15,000 on the low end to \$100,000 and more for outdoor living areas, he said.

But for readers balking at such prices, Ball has some tips for men and women on a tight budget:

- Rather than a fireplace, buy a chiminea.
- Use crushed stone for a patio base.
- Choose construction materials that are less expensive and labor-intensive.

"If you have a low budget, you could probably get away with spending \$3,000 to \$5,000," Ball said.

Whatever the budget, Smith said, a homeowner's first concern should be determining the purpose of the outdoor space.

"Inside or outside, it's function first," Smith said.

Homeowners need to evaluate how much space will be used for cooking, eating, entertaining and lounging, and plan accordingly, she said.

"It (the space) needs to be comfortable for family or friends," Smith said.

Always create a design first before setting up anything, suggested Ball.

And if a project is too costly, think about working in phases. For the homeowner who chooses that route, Ball said, pavers and walls should come first. They tend to be the



TOM SPADER PHOTO

A backyard on Amherst Drive in the Lake Riviera section of Brick is a comfortable outdoor living space.

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most expensive part of the process but, once installed, homeowners can build around them, he said.

Once these basics are in place, consider accessories like furniture that will personalize the outdoor area.

Smith, the interior designer, gravitates toward durable fabrics like Sunbrella, which are made to withstand the elements. But Smith cautions that even the hardiest fabrics should be covered when not used, because while the fabric itself might not mildew, dust or pollen stuck on the fabric might.

Plants are another essential part of any outdoor area, added Olsen, the landscape designer.

"Plants make the house," Olsen said.

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