



## THE FIFTH ROOM



A fire invites a Seacoast, N.H., family to enjoy a summer evening. Landscape design and photo by Charles C. Hugo Landscape Design, LLC, of South Berwick, Maine.

The firepit and outdoor fireplace have become commonplace in the outdoor living space.

# The Heart Of The Outdoor Room

by Lynn Felici-Gallant  
indigogardens@comcast.net

It is not light we need, but fire -  
Frederic Douglass

People have gathered around fire for ages – originally for warmth and cooking, and recently for aesthetic, as well as practical purposes. Fire was the original connector of families – the entity around which meals were prepared, conversations ensued and plans for the future made. Indeed, fire was the heart of the first “outdoor room.”

The terms “outdoor room” and “outdoor living” have spread like, well, wild-fire. Yet, the concept is simple. Outdoor rooms mirror indoor kitchens and living spaces, both of which draw people together. Outdoor rooms, like indoor spaces, are relationship-centered.

The outdoor room encompasses a sitting and eating area, cooking facilities and a hearth. The space can be as primitive as a

fire ring and a few lawn chairs, or as elaborate as a state-of-the-art kitchen with fine furniture, weather-resistant décor and a beautifully-crafted brick or stone fireplace.

The trend toward outdoor living presents the garden center retailer, mason contractor and landscape designer with myriad opportunities.

### The Homeowner’s Perspective

For Jake and Jackie Cahill of North Hampton, N.H., a firepit framed their landscape design. Nestled at the end of a dirt driveway amid 80 acres of woodland, Jackie sits in the back yard of the family’s secluded, 2-year-old home. She explains the importance of a hearth to her outdoor room.

“I designed the pool area and landscape with this firepit in mind,” says Cahill. “I love fire, and wanted to create a space that was cozy and alluring, and that would bring my family and friends together.”

Indeed, the Cahill’s firepit is set apart

from the family’s kidney-shaped pool. It is constructed from cobble sunken into a bluestone patio enclosed by four enormous granite stones for sitting. A breathtaking landscape of evergreens and native plants surround the hearth, while acres of woods form the backdrop.

“Everyone loves to stare into a fire,” says Jackie. “It takes you away from the stresses of the day. This firepit makes me feel as if I’m camping outdoors in nature, where it is peaceful and serene.”

### Outdoor Living Statistics

The Cahill’s experience is consistent with the growing trend in outdoor living. The U.S. Census Bureau claims that consumers spend upwards of \$40 billion annually on upgrading outdoor living spaces.

And, according to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association:

- U.S. consumers spent \$172 billion on home remodeling and renovations in 2002, a major part of it in outdoor amenities;

## Building Safely – Consult A Professional

Paul M. Gallant, a mason and general manager of W.S. Goodrich, Inc. – a 120-year-old, family-owned, independent brick and stone supply company in Epping, N.H. – has witnessed a tremendous increase in outdoor living construction in the past few years. The homeowners and contractors he interacts with are incorporating outdoor fireplaces and firepits into landscape designs at a record pace.

Gallant notes there are many different styles of outdoor fire conduits, from simple fire-rings to intricate stone hearths replete with stainless steel cooking appliances. He suggests, however, that homeowners and retailers contemplating installing a fireplace seek the advice of a trained professional.

“Anyone can gather fieldstone and assemble a fire-ring on their property,” says Gallant. “And a landscaper can design and install a beautiful firepit as part of an elaborate plan. But building a fireplace that meets safety standards is best left to a mason.”

Gallant adds there are rules for constructing fireplaces that apply regardless of where the fireplace is located. “No matter the homeowner’s end use – whether it is cooking, entertaining or aesthetics – the design of an outdoor fireplace is the same as one for indoors,” says Gallant. “It should include a firebox, smoke shelf, smoke chamber and chimney.”

Gallant suggests consulting a local, reputable, independent masonry supply company for a list of masons, landscape designers and contractors qualified to build outdoor fireplaces and firepits. He also recommends contacting the Building Stone Institute at [www.buildingstoneinstitute.org](http://www.buildingstoneinstitute.org), or the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association at [www.hpba.org](http://www.hpba.org), for information about fireplaces and firepit construction.



- In 2006, Americans spent in excess of \$3 billion on outdoor furnishings, as well as nearly \$3 billion more on barbecue grills, equipment and accessories; and

- Outdoor hearth products such as chimineas, firepits and portable heaters are selling at record levels.

### Build It & They Will Come

Garden center retailers – particularly those with landscape design and construction services – are poised to capitalize on this consumer phenomenon. Landscape design and construction services are, in fact, integral to creating high-end outdoor living environments.

According to Donna Meyers, spokesperson for the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association: “High-end retailers must bring in a range of artisans – including mason contractors, designers, landscapers and others – to properly produce these showcase outdoor rooms. The goal is to feed one another’s businesses while making the customer’s life easier in the process.”

In order to effectively promote the outdoor living lifestyle, garden centers may want to consider building a showcase outdoor room at their facilities, with a brick or stone fireplace, sophisticated cooking facility, versatile furniture and dramatic plantings. It will inspire homeowners to purchase products and/or enlist



The backyard firepit from Smith & Hawken is an example of high-end products on the market.

the services of on-site or contracted designers, and the opportunities for events are endless.

Imagine hosting an evening gathering of top customers around a well-designed fireplace, or a cooking demonstration featuring a celebrity chef using plants from the garden center.

At the very least, all garden centers should be selling some form of fire conduit – be it a barbecue grill, chiminea or copper firepit – as a central component of the outdoor living department. Smith & Hawken retailers can feature the company’s line of firepits and cauldrons, merchandised in vignettes that paint a picture of people gathering, cooking and connecting.

“There’s something fundamental about fire,” says Cahill. “It draws you in on a spiritual level.”

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Lynn Felici-Gallant is a freelance garden writer and gardener. Formerly the marketing, events & community relations coordinator for Churchill’s in Exeter, N.H., she is the owner of Indigo Gardens, LLC: nature-inspired writing, marketing & design.