

home style

Ask an expert: outdoor spaces

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Q. What is the best way to start when planning an outdoor-living area?

A. The first thing to do is a site analysis. This is when you consider how your outdoor space will be used and by whom. As families grow and evolve, how you use your house changes. And these changes affect your exterior space, too. Do you want someplace to entertain? A play area for children? Need to camouflage yard tools or garbage cans or simply beautify your back yard? Make a list of the features you already have that you want to keep or you need to work around, like a large tree or swimming pool, and those that you would like to have – your wish list.

When designing your exterior room, consider your interior color scheme. Keep this in mind when choosing the brick or stone colors for the patio or walkways. This is a good technique when thinking about the plants you'll use as well.

Q. What problems are typically found in an outdoor area?

A. In the New Orleans area, probably the biggest problem is poor drainage. Subsurface-drainage problems, which can be caused by gutter spouts if your land isn't graded properly, will result in wet spots. This standing water creates a host of problems. It can back up into your house, create fissures in your home's foundation, kill your plants, create a breeding ground for mosquitoes and cause your patio to sink. Other common [outdoor] problems are poor access to the area, bad workmanship on current structures, lack of privacy and not planning for the root structures of your existing plants and trees.

Q. Once I've decided what I want, how should I implement the plan?

A. It isn't necessary to do everything at one time, but there is an order to the process. The first thing to do is solve any

major issues that exist, such as drainage problems. You may also want to relocate plants that you want to keep, if possible, so that they aren't damaged during construction. Next, perform any construction such as [building] patios or walkways. Remember that careful measuring will provide a much better basis for estimating the materials required and costs involved, as well as insure that you aren't crossing property lines. Once the structures are built, grade the surrounding land to match and then landscape.

Q. How do you create an old-fashioned New Orleans courtyard?

A. Probably the most remembered aspect of the quintessential New Orleans courtyard is the atmosphere created by the colors and fragrances of the plants it contains. Ferns will provide deep, dark, lush greenery. Night-blooming jasmine vines and sweet-olive trees give off the lingering scents that give your courtyard a presence. Camellias, camellia sasanquas and azaleas can be used as borders or as hedges and are traditional indigenous plants. Even large yards can be given the cozy feel associated with a traditional courtyard if they're broken up into smaller, more intimate areas. Terracotta urns, potagers, brick walkways and small trees, such as Japanese dwarf magnolias, help to achieve this.

A well-planned space results from paying attention to details. Many small elements make up the overall impression you achieve and combine to create your special haven from the fast-paced lifestyle of today. Creating an outdoor space with features and plants you like will help to keep you in touch with nature as well as refresh and relax you in the midst of our suburban environment.

Beverly Katz
creates outdoor
spaces in steps.
Determine the
purpose of your
outdoor area,
then correct any
underlying prob-
lems, such as
poor drainage.