



A "fire boulder" burns at the home of Peggy, left, and Craig Schwartz in Overland Park, Kansas.

JIM BARCUS/KANSAS CITY STAR/MCT

Fire Pits Evolve To Offer A Backyard Gathering Place

BY JILL DRAPER
McClatchy Newspapers
(MCT)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Since ancient times, man has been drawn to fire for food, warmth and comfort from the dark. That attraction is still going strong, and options for gathering round a backyard circle of dancing flames with family and friends are more numerous than ever.

Whether you're looking for a small, portable fire pit in the \$100 range or a large, outdoor fireplace for \$10,000 or more, you'll want to consider the full line of products available.

"It can be a daunting task for the homeowner to sort out," says Andy Wright, a landscape designer with Landworks, which works in the Kansas City, Mo., area. "The market is really evolving. We're on the verge of many possibilities."

Wright begins by asking clients how they entertain and what goals they have for the space. Are they trying to screen something? Do they want built-in seating? What is the budget?

Ron and Amy Mertz met with him about building an outdoor fireplace in their south Overland Park, Kan., yard.

First he helped them select a basic design using various widths and colors of pavers from a local hardscape company. Next the fireplace was constructed at a factory in Wisconsin. It was delivered by truck six weeks later in two pieces and assembled on a concrete pad in about two hours.

For the Mertz family, Wright suggested attached benches on either side of the fire box, but they could have chosen built-in wood-storage boxes, or mini-waterfalls flowing over the sides or a pizza oven.

While the modular construction is slightly cheaper than a fireplace constructed block by block (about 10 to 20 percent less, Wright says), the main attraction is the ease of installation. "The level of detail in this project would have taken lots of man hours to fabricate onsite," he says.

The fireplace was an immediate hit. "We went from never hanging out in the backyard to being

AVOID FIRE PIT PITFALLS

- It's going to rain on your pit. Plan for drainage, or you'll end up with a smelly, murky mess.
- Wind-blown debris will collect inside, so consider a cover for the pit when it's not in use.
- Locate the fuel controls in a place where they're somewhat concealed but never inside the pit.
- Make sure the fuel line has adequate pressure, or you'll wind up with weak flames.
- Don't block a great view (including the sunset) with a large outdoor fireplace chimney.
- Consider the typical direction of the wind so you won't be bathed in smoke.
- Think about the height of the fire vs. seating; many times the fire pit is too low for best effect.
- Check local ordinances and homeowner association rules before you build or purchase. Some bylaws allow gas but not wood smoke.

outside every free weekend," Ron Mertz says. His children, under a watchful eye, use it frequently as well, and it has been the scene of many hot dog and s'mores parties. Mertz also likes the way the pavers tie in with the materials used for their patio, steps, walls and deck.

At another Overland Park home, Craig and Peggy Schwartz were considering purchasing a traditional fire pit when they noticed a fire boulder at a nearby model home. They were intrigued and thought it would add character to their yard.

Jared Barnes, a designer with Next to Nature Landscape, steered them to Canyon Stone in Olathe, Kan., to browse its selection of pre-drilled limestone and sandstone boulders. Cripple Creek Rock Co. in Kansas City also pre-drills boulders, specializing in granite.

"The main thing to consider with these is placement," Barnes says. "Once you plumb a gas line and set a 1,200-pound boulder, you don't want to move it."

He situated the rock at one end of the

Schwartz's patio with a water feature behind it. At the other end, his crew used pavers to build a rectangular bar with a fire tray running along the middle. Gas flames flicker through smoky black glass beads, while the fire boulder holds lava rocks.

The unique combination has drawn the attention of neighbors, Peggy Schwartz says. "People are always coming by to see what's happening and saying how pretty everything looks. One guy who was driving by at night saw the flames and called up to say, 'I think that bar is on fire!'" she says laughing.

While the Schwartz home has a custom-built fire bar, patio furniture stores often sell manufactured fire tables ranging from traditional to contemporary designs. At the upper price range — \$1,200 to \$2,500 — the tables feature granite tops and come in various heights: chat, dining and bar.

Some have interchangeable tops so the fire tray can be switched to a solid granite center with a small hole for an umbrella or a larger hole for an ice bucket. These tables can weigh up to 1,000 pounds, so again, placement is important.

What's next in the world of fire? Wright is a big fan of fire-water combinations, now becoming popular in the Southwest. Such combinations include a stone bench encircling a fountain encircling a fire bowl, and fire pots perched along the edges of pools so the flames reflect in the water at night. There's also an inches-wide ground-level fire bar that curves halfway around a hot tub.

"I don't know if I'd recommend that one for my clients," he cautions. "You'd have to be careful where you step."

Still, whatever form the pairing takes, it's hard to top the tranquil sound and look of water juxtaposed with the flicker of red-hot flames, two of nature's most powerful elements.

Whatever the market brings in the future, it seems likely that fire will continue to be a focal point in the home landscape.

"Everyone says they like the warmth it puts out, but that's not the main attraction," Wright says. "They really like the drama of watching the flames dance."

Weed Patch

Not Much To Crow About In 2012

BY LINDA WUEBBEN
P&D Correspondent

I must have a mean streak in me.

This week as I weeded in my garden, I pulled some of those weeds that come back and back and never go away. I shook the dirt off the roots and threw them down on the hot ground between the rows, chanting, "Die, you dirty rotten weeds!"

Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't but I sure feel better when it I say it.

There hasn't been much to crow about in the garden this year and it hasn't been a great hassle keeping it weeded. When it doesn't rain, even the weeds don't sprout.

We have enjoyed six tomatoes from those three plants I purchased back in March and babied until I could plant them in April. I really keep a close watch on my tomatoes. They took an early hit when the corn right next to my garden was sprayed with herbicide and I ended up replanting several plants. It may be September before I have any to can but I hope to keep them producing as long as I can.

I had some damage to other garden plants but I am amazed how beautiful my gladiolas look — no flowers yet but great looking stalks. We have eaten many onions, had some garden-fresh lettuce and radishes. It is kind of hard to tell if the damage is from spray or from the intense heat we have had. Bugs are on the squash plants and also cucumbers but my cabbage and eggplant are very healthy and growing.

We were really disappointed because the peas were a complete loss as were beans and kohlrabi. The kohlrabi plants were eaten alive even as they popped out of the ground and so were the bean plants. I'm pretty sure that's because of the nice winter we had which didn't offer any stress to insects or bugs. Bob keeps pumping water and watches his sweet corn as well. Looking forward to doing some fall replanting and praying the dry cycle is ended by then.



Linda WUEBBEN

I'm sitting here in this 100-degree plus heat, thankful my air-conditioning is working but as a farm wife, having to face some hard facts. The corn crop may possibly be a bust this year. The consensus is still out on the bean crop and every farmer is praying it will hold on for rain. The forecast doesn't hold out much hope but a farmer is the most optimistic person on the planet. Tomorrow is always a new day and it will rain sometime. Whether it happens before the crop season is over is a big question.

Farmers are a special breed of person. Who else dedicates their life to feeding the rest of the planet? And who else gambles every year, day in and day out, with expenses and dollar figures which would frighten most everyday people? Sometimes we have really good years like the past couple but generally, every day, there's a prayer or look to heaven just to let God know we're still waiting down here and wondering when He's going to do something about it.

Oh, there are lots of irrigation wells pumping thousands of gallons on this year's crop thinking they can survive without God's blessings but some of those fields don't look much better than the dry-land corn. You just can't beat Mother Nature.

And Bob and I cannot seem to beat the birds either. The red beauties called a truce for about two weeks and we thought they must have been going through mating season. They started again recently with a vengeance so many days Bob heads to the hydrant, gets a bucket of water and washes the sides of our car and pickup. There hasn't been any mud to wash off so a quick swipe usually cleans the mess up. It got a little more challenging when the cardinals found mulberries. The juicy purple fruit wasn't plentiful enough to find for Bob's cereal but the birds found some tidbits.

So God, it's me again. My air-conditioning is working well. How about Yours? We could both save a little energy if you turned the faucet on and let it run. You know, heat rises. You must be feeling some of this up there. I know you know what's best for everyone but even just a little trickle would give us tiny human beings relief and lift our spirits. Until tomorrow then, I'll be keeping the faith and praying for blessings on our crops. Hope you get this memo!

Books Jockey For Shelf Space With Other Cherished Collections

BY LAURA K. LLOYD
McClatchy Newspapers
(MCT)

Bookcases are in transition, just like the people who own them. The printed word no longer needs paper, and paper no longer needs stiffened linen or leather to contain it and be a ... book.

Rows of decorative spines with titles stamped in gold or black — those advertisements of a household's taste and personality lined up in view — might actually start looking a bit too 20th century for people hurtling themselves into a paperless future.

Or not.

Current magazines still recommend buying hardbacks for almost nothing at garage sales to fill shelves to make a person seem well-read. As recently as March 2012, Dwight Garner, after taking a dig at the limitations of e-books in *The New York Times*, thought it relevant to quote bibliophile and novelist Anna Quindlen: "I would be most content if my children grew to be the kind of people who think decorating consists mostly of building bookshelves."

And Benjamin Sundermeier, designer at Space Planning + Design in Kansas City, Mo., said his clients don't seem motivated to "shift away from shelves" housing books.

In the books vs. bookless micro-controversy, books still have a lot of support. (In the eminently practical "Use What You Have Decorating" by Lauri Ward, books are treated as design accessories that deserve thoughtful, neat shelving that

doesn't mix in distractions like photos, art objects or gewgaws.)

Let's say, however, that your attachment to some of your books (paperbacks of Jodi Picoult? First editions of Tom Clancy?) is starting to fade as you develop your love affair with your e-reader. Perhaps you're trying to simplify or allot space to some of the other design accessories you have acquired. It's hardly news that bookshelves are also the perfect venue to display collections of majolica, Blue Willow china or "Star Wars" action figures, among countless possibilities.

Shelving has always been about showing an owner's personality through possessions, and there are many ways to do this without an assemblage of books. Snobbishness that books make a household seem educated and serious may give way to other philosophies as new technologies continue to gain influence.

Sundermeier has recently noticed a trend toward repurposing bookshelves for imaginative uses in the home. "We used antique bookshelves in a closet for shoes and sweaters and boxes," he said of a recent design project.

Another client, he said, has an iron and wood bookshelf "displaying her collection of beautiful cookware and her kitchen TV."

In another house, a Chinese pot rack has found its function as a place to stack books.

Sundermeier said these rough-hewn, individualized shelves are part of a direction in decor that puts special emphasis on having a home filled with one-of-a-kind items.

He noted that the influential High Point furniture market in North Car-



MIKE RANDELL/KANSAS CITY STAR/MCT

Bookshelves are being used in more and more ways, such as this Model A bookshelf used for cooking equipment.

olina recently chose to report some of the findings of the British-based "Trend Bible": a move toward interiors that don't look "done," that embrace imperfections and objects with a patina or well-loved wear.

It's a reaction against the numbing sameness of all things digital. That can include bookshelves and what people choose to put in them. "I have a client with traditional bookcases who put her creamware collection in them in her living room," he said.

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