

Expand Living Space Outdoors

A well-planned outdoor living space can become a homeowner's backyard getaway or the perfect gathering place with friends and family, adding a new dimension to your yard and creating space you didn't even know you had. When deciding on whether you'd like your new outdoor haven to be a patio or deck, research is your first step. Check out your terrain and local building codes. What kind of budget are you looking at? Decks can be a more affordable option than patios, but concrete, while more expensive, tends to be the sturdiest material with the lowest maintenance needs.

Several factors can determine whether a deck or patio is best for you. How much weight does your space need to hold? If you are considering a huge Jacuzzi tub, a patio might support its weight better. What about climate? Will the surface become too hot to walk on during summer's peak? Does rain or snow create runoff problems on a flat patio surface? If you have a rough backyard terrain, a raised deck may end up your best choice instead of expensive excavation for patios. Look through books and magazines for ideas, visit home shows and speak with contractors to determine what kind of space and design you want.

Once you've determined whether a deck or patio is best for your home, the possibilities are endless. Stone, brick and concrete pavers are available in a range of styles and colors and are durable. Remember that site preparation is important for drainage, grade and proper placement. Check with a professional that can provide the experience and the equipment that your project needs.

Flagstone and concrete patios are also popular among homeowners. Remember to allow for expansion in order to prevent cracking. Cracking in concrete is inevitable, but it can be minimized with proper installation. If you dislike dirt or have pets, consider a raised deck. A raised deck may also work as a better option for low-lying yards that tend to become soggy when it rains.

Most decks are made of wood, ranging from pressure-treated pine and fir to more durable – and pricey – woods such as red cedar, redwoods and tropical hardwoods. No matter what the type, wood decks require maintenance. To reduce the amount of maintenance required, consider composite and vinyl decking. These materials are less susceptible to swelling and also are more resistant to insects. The cost, however, can be significantly higher, particularly if coordinating railing and balustrade systems. Concrete decks, while much more expensive than wood or composite, are the most durable and require only the occasional pressure wash and periodic re-sealing. And no longer just drab gray, concrete is now available in a nearly limitless variety of styles, colors and patterns.

Before beginning your outdoor project, assess your space. Where do you have the best sunlight? Do you want to use your space for dining or grilling? If so, do you have a large enough area for tables and chairs? Is there one area of the yard that is quieter and has more privacy from neighbors? A good home builder, remodeler or landscape architect can help you design a master plan for your space and your ideas.

Once your patio or deck is built, only your imagination limits the extent of your retreat. Plants, flowers, trellises, decorative screens, garden sculptures, fountains and furnishings can all enhance your backyard haven. For more information on building a deck or patio, or to talk with a professional about designing your outdoor retreat, visit the find a member section at www.whba.net for area professionals.