



### ENTERTAIN EASILY

Less lugging of dishes and drinks: Props like the right trays and cooler can make alfresco dining a cinch.

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### STAY PROTECTED

Summer sun, rain, and bugs won't spoil your backyard gatherings when you're properly equipped.

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# YOUR BACKYARD HAVEN

These easy ideas will transform your deck—  
or patio or terrace—into a comfortable oasis  
for dining, relaxing, and gathering with your  
favorite people. **BY SHARLENE BREakey**



## CREATE A COMFORT ZONE

Your deck will feel like a cozy outdoor room with comfy chairs, a bright rug, the right lights, and more.

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**WITH SUMMER ABOUT** to go into full swing, it's time to ready your deck or backyard for all the gatherings you have planned—or that spontaneously arise—during this kick-back time of year. No doubt your outdoor space already has much of what it needs for good times, such as chairs to relax in, an umbrella for shade, and a great grill. But if anything could use a quick cleanup or replacement (broken wicker? nonworking string lights?), or if you're simply ready for something fresh and new, these suggestions and how-tos from landscape designers, safety experts, and CR's grilling pros will help transform your outdoor space into a sanctuary for memorable parties and hangouts this season. Read on for ideas on décor—from seating to lights to rugs—shelter from rain and sun, and entertaining that's a breeze.

# FEEL MORE AT HOME OUTSIDE

The best outdoor spaces seem almost like another room of the house, according to Kat Aul Cervoni, founder of Staghorn NYC, a landscape design firm. She suggests you take stock of what you love indoors, then find ways to bring that feeling outdoors. Lush greenery, splashes of favorite colors, a rug, the right style chair, and a good playlist, and your backyard is a new living room, except with the sky as your ceiling.



## Cool Seating & Secret Storage

### PATIO FURNITURE

► **Sol 72 Outdoor Lancashire Wicker/Rattan 4-Person Seating Group with Cushions** \$1,296  
[wayfair.com](http://wayfair.com)

### OTTOMAN

**Goplus No Collection Brown Rattan Ottoman**  
\$132 for 2  
[lowes.com](http://lowes.com)



## Set up, sit back ... and relax

### GOOD SEATING IS KEY

Ideally, chairs should be stable, multifunctional, easy to care for, and comfortable. If you need replacements, keep these characteristics in mind

as you shop. "Table height chairs with arms are best; they give you something to push up from," says Priscilla Flores, occupational therapist at Cleveland Clinic's Lou Ruvo

Center for Brain Health in Las Vegas. For an all-weather wicker option, see the set at left, which includes two chairs, a sofa, and a table. (Add an ottoman with a flip top and you'll have a rest for your feet—and extra storage.) For materials, think low maintenance, says Julie Farris, a landscape designer and founder of Landstylist. Styles made of mesh or woven rope are particularly easy to care for. If you choose a set with cushions, she says, anticipate regular cleaning and storing. And beware of inexpensive natural wicker sets: "They degrade over time and can break underneath you," says Alyssa Bowser, an occupational therapist at Stanford Healthcare in Palo Alto, Calif. Another point to keep in mind: What's comfortable and practical indoors might be less so outdoors. Take recliners. Those zero-gravity reclining chaises may be tempting, but they can tip too quickly and are hard to lift yourself out of, Flores says. Similarly, tall bar stools can get harder to climb up on or down from as you age. Whatever furnishings you choose, don't overcrowd your deck or patio, she says. An uncluttered space with clear, wide paths is safest for all.

## HOW TO CLEAN OUTDOOR CHAIRS IN 3 STEPS

Give old furniture a good wash so that it'll look like new. First, clear dirt, mulch particles, and leaves with a leaf blower, says Becky Rapinchuk, author of "Clean Mama's Guide to a Healthy Home: The Simple, Room-by-Room Plan for a Natural Home" (HarperOne, 2019). Then:

**1. Use a shop vac or indoor vacuum** before you wash anything. It will suck up dirt and pollen (which can stain when wet) from cushion edges and chair crevices.

**2. Remove cushion covers** and pretreat mold and mildew spots with a spritz of vinegar and sprinkle of baking soda (for up to 30 minutes). Wash, then air-dry to prevent shrinkage.

**3. Attack gunky areas** on furniture frames with a small bristle brush and a gentle, natural cleanser, such as castile soap (so that you don't kill any vegetation).

## Bright Ideas

### SOLAR LANTERNS

► **Soji Stella Pearl Solar Lantern 3-pack** \$115  
[allsopgarden.com](http://allsopgarden.com)

## Light the way

The right lighting is safe, practical, and pretty.

### PATH LIGHTS

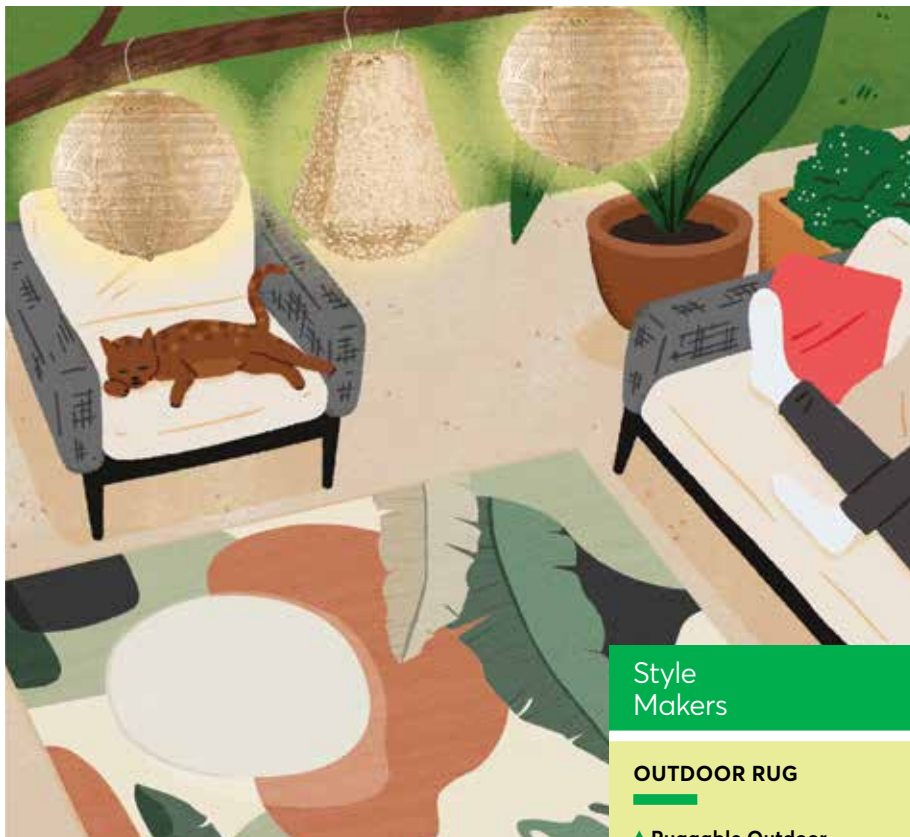
Solar metal ones like the Harbor Breeze 10-Lumen Black Solar Integrated LED Outdoor Path Light Kit (\$35, [lowes.com](http://lowes.com)) are easy to install and don't require a power source. Measure your path to see how many you need (the packaging will provide spacing info). To install, drive the plastic stake in first with a mallet, then slide the fixture onto it, says Kevin Magness, pro specialist at Lowe's in Grand Forks, N.D.

### STRING LIGHTS

Gather wire, eye screw hooks, and lights to string between one wall of your house, say, and a tree or shed opposite. Make sure you can plug the string in easily to an outdoor outlet, or use a solar model like the Brightech 27-ft. Solar Black Indoor/Outdoor String Light (\$40, [lowes.com](http://lowes.com)). Measure 8 to 10 feet up from the ground and mark where you'll need hooks (about three on each side spaced a few feet apart). Screw eye hooks in, or wrap a tight loop of cable around trees or a pole, to attach the lights. Zigzag wire tautly back and forth from one hook or loop to the other, then attach the strings to the wire using zip ties.

### SOLAR LANTERNS

For extra charm, hang durable Soji solar lanterns (see above) from a tree or hook.



## Style Makers

### OUTDOOR RUG

► **Ruggable Outdoor Havana Multicolor Rug**  
5x7 feet, \$229  
[ruggable.com](http://ruggable.com)

### PLANTER BOX

**Demeter Elevated Raised Bed**  
\$160  
[gardeners.com](http://gardeners.com)



## Add personality

### HOW TO DO RUGS RIGHT

A rug is cozy for bare feet but can also pose a tripping hazard, so follow Bowser's ground rules. First, avoid placing one on walking pathways, in high traffic

areas, and under your dining table, where it can trip up guests' dining chairs. Instead, put a soft one underfoot in your seating area and choose one that's big enough to fit under the legs of all your furniture so that no one catches a foot. For ease, Stafford Meyer, founder of the doormat company Porte + Hall, recommends rugs that are either washable, like the one above, or made of polypropylene, which resists mildew and signs of wear, and is easy to wipe off.

### TUNES & GREENERY

For music, look for water-resistant, Bluetooth, and wireless speakers with long battery life, like the CR Recommended models at left. For some natural color, add a few bright annuals.

CR'S  
TOP PICKS  
**OUTDOOR  
SPEAKERS**



✓ **JBL Partybox Encore Essential Wireless & Bluetooth Speaker** \$300

**62** OVERALL SCORE



✓ **Sony XE300 Wireless & Bluetooth Speaker** \$170

**54** OVERALL SCORE

# KEEP IT COZY

Sudden showers, burning rays, biting bugs, or chilly temperatures don't have to force your outdoor plans inside. To protect you from the elements, here are expert-approved, ingenious fixes, including popup shades and fire pits to add warmth and atmosphere to any setting.



## Give yourself some shelter

### FOR SPOT COVERAGE

The right shelter can keep everyone happy right where they are, regardless of rain or bright sun. Umbrellas are a popular choice, because they work in almost any space, are easy to install, and come in a variety of sizes (a 9-foot umbrella provides shade for most table sizes). Look for one that has a metal pole (less likely to break than wood), a vented canopy so that wind won't cause your umbrella to set sail, and a water- and UV-resistant fabric like Sunbrella (a brand also used for upholstery and cushions) because it never fades, says Jesse Bawsel, manager of the Armstrong Garden Centers

in Pasadena, Calif. (One good option: the Treasure Garden Umbrella at right, which also has an auto-tilt function so that you can move it as the sunlight shifts.) And don't forget to buy an umbrella base (typically sold separately) that's at least 50 pounds; some are designed for freestanding umbrellas, others for use under a table with an umbrella hole.

### FOR SMALLER PORCHES OR BALCONIES

Roller shades are a good choice because they are inexpensive and quick to install. (Check out the Coolaroo Cordless UV Blocking

Fade Resistant Fabric Exterior Roller Shade, 72x72 inches, \$62; homedepot.com.) If your deck or patio is right off your home, a shade sail or awnings that attach to the wall can provide plenty of overhead shade, Cervoni says. Many, like the Veikous awning at right, retract when you want to let the sunshine in.

### FOR LARGER YARDS

A gazebo or pergola will offer the most shade and protection. There are freestanding pergolas as well as ones that can be attached to a wall to extend a living room, for example, says Gary McCoy, store manager at the Lowe's in Central

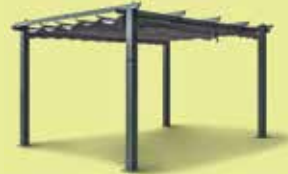
## Easy Shade Solutions

### PREFAB GAZEBO

◀ **Sunjoy 2-Tier Backyard Portable Pop Up Gazebo**  
\$220 [sunjoyshop.com](http://sunjoyshop.com)

### PREFAB PERGOLA

**Veikous 10'x10' Aluminum Outdoor Pergola Canopy**  
\$500 [veikous.com](http://veikous.com)



### PATIO UMBRELLA

**Treasure Garden 9-Foot Deluxe Auto-Tilt Umbrella**  
\$287  
[amazon.com](http://amazon.com)



### AWNING

**Veikous 10'x8' Retractable Patio Awning with Manual Crank** \$193 [walmart.com](http://walmart.com)



Charlotte, N.C. Freestanding options include a pergola with a retractable canopy, such as the Veikous model above, that opens for good weather or closes to keep rain out. Or for even more coverage, consider a gazebo like the more portable Sunjoy model above, which has both a canopy and mesh curtains to help keep insects away.

## Warm up a chilly evening

### FOR AMBIENCE AND A LITTLE HEAT

If you don't have much room, tabletop fire pits—small fire-safe vessels that burn isopropyl alcohol, bioethanol, or wood pellets—can provide an inviting glow (but not a lot of warmth). To use one safely, keep the flame away from low-hanging branches or fabrics; place it in the center of a sturdy, flat, noncombustible surface; and never leave it unsupervised, says Russ Dimmit, director of education for the Chimney Safety Institute of America. The tiny Colsen Portable Fire Concrete Bowl Pot Fireplace (\$40, Amazon) can use its

own brand of fuel or others and burns for about 40 to 50 minutes—enough time to roast your marshmallows. The smokeless Mesa (\$120, solostove.com) burns for about as long but uses wood pellets or mini logs. TerraFlame's Basin Fire Bowl Table Top (\$100, terrafire.com), made of concrete, burns up to 3 hours on a gel fuel that comes in a can. For all tabletop fire pits, follow the manufacturer's instructions and use only the fuel that is recommended. If you have more space, consider a smokeless fire pit (see two CR Recommended models, below). Just be sure to place it in an open area, at least 6 to

10 inches off the ground on a metal or noncombustible surface, and ideally 10 to 20 feet away from flammable structures, trees, shrubs, and wires.

### FOR EXTRA WARMTH

Try a standing propane heater, like Style Selections 48,000-Btu Stainless Steel Patio Heater (\$169, lowes.com), which runs on a grill-style propane tank. To warm a 200-square-foot area, you'll need between 46,000 and 48,000 Btu, McCoy says. Follow the manufacturers' safety guidelines and keep kids away. Propane patio heaters can be tippy, Dimmit says.

CR'S  
TOP PICKS  
SMOKELESS  
FIRE PITS

#### ✓ Cuisinart Cleanburn Fire Pit \$249

90 OVERALL SCORE

#### ✓ Inno Stage Smokeless Fire Pit \$95

86 OVERALL SCORE



### TIP

**SMART STORAGE** There are hundreds of outdoor storage solutions, from hinged plastic bins to shelved sheds, but Cervoni recommends that you look for stealthy stagers, such as the Zimtown Beige Fir Potting

Bench Garden Workbench (\$100, walmart.com), based on the size of your space and what you need to stash close at hand. "Sturdy, durable materials, such as composites, metals, and hardwoods, tend to be the most watertight and last the longest," she says.

## Keep the biters at bay

### HOW TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST MOSQUITOES

If you don't have a screened-in porch, try an oscillating pedestal fan, which reduced mosquito landings on people sitting nearby by 45 to 65 percent in one CR test. And keep gutters free of debris and your yard clear of empty pots and troughs. "Mosquitoes lay eggs in standing water, so reducing such breeding sites can significantly reduce their population," says Jody Gangloff-Kaufmann, an entomologist and coordinator of the New York State Integrated Pest Management Community program at Cornell University.

### FORGET BUG ZAPPERS

Research suggests they kill very few mosquitoes (and zap many insects that actually eat those biters). Citronella candles are no good either; their scent, which does the work, floats away on the breeze. Instead, the best approach is an integrated one: a fan, screens (where possible), and a good insect repellent—see CR Recommended options below—that will provide several hours of protection.

CR'S  
TOP PICKS  
INSECT  
REPELLENTS



✓ 3M Ultrathon Insect Repellent \$8 \$11

94 OVERALL SCORE



✓ Repel Lemon Eucalyptus Insect Repellent \$2 \$8

90 OVERALL SCORE

# SIMPLIFY OUTDOOR EATING

**Dining on your deck with good friends** on a summer evening is one of life's great pleasures. That said, all the lugging and toting from the house can be a headache. Here are pro tips to make your setup and cleanup as easy as possible, from Meg Critchell, owner of Meg Critchell Events in Greenwich, Conn.



## Entertaining Must-Haves

### DINNERWARE

◀ **Crate & Barrel Marin Blue Outdoor Melamine Dinner Plate** \$10 each  
[crateandbarrel.com](http://crateandbarrel.com)

### FLATWARE

**Annova Silverware Set, Retro Style** \$43, 20 pieces  
[amazon.com](http://amazon.com)



### WINEGLASSES

**Michley Unbreakable Stemmed Wine Glasses** \$32, set of 4  
[amazon.com](http://amazon.com)



### NAPKINS

**Ramanta Home Oversized Cotton Dinner Napkins** \$25 for 12  
[amazon.com](http://amazon.com)



## 3 GRILL CLEANUP TIPS

That gunk on the grill isn't just unsanitary, it will also keep your burgers, steaks, seafood, and veggies from tasting delicious. A clean barbecue also means safer food and less risk of a sudden flare-up. Here are three quick cleaning tips from Consumer Reports' grilling experts.

### 1. Scrape off built-up grease.

The best time to clean the grill is right after cooking, when the grates are still warm (food comes off more easily). Scrape both sides thoroughly with one of the tools mentioned at right. For stainless steel grates: Wash with soapy water and rinse them well.

### 2. Avoid using bristle brushes.

Metal bristles left on the grates can end up in your meal, then someone can swallow one and wind up in the ER. Instead, try cleaning your stainless steel or porcelain-coated grill grates with a tool such as a pumice stone or a coil-shaped bristle-free brush.

## Stock your cupboard

### REPLACE THE DISPOSABLE PRODUCTS

Paper and plastic are outdoor dining staples for good reasons—safety, easy cleanup—but their disposability is neither cost- nor eco-conscious. The alternative: tableware and flatware that are light, nonbreakable, and cost effective in the long run.

### MELAMINE DISH SETS

They come in pretty designs like traditional dishware but are lightweight, shatter-resistant, and not plastic; they're not for use in a microwave, though. (See one attractive example from Crate & Barrel, on the facing page.) Our editors also liked the fun pattern, scratch-resistance, and durability of the Certified International Talavera Melamine 12-pc Dinnerware Set for 4 (\$127, Amazon). For flatware, think simple and sturdy: for example, the Annova stainless set on the facing page.

### NONBREAKABLE GLASSES

One convenient choice is wineglasses that won't shatter, like the Michley 15-ounce stems on the

facing page, which are plastic but look remarkably like glass. To keep wine cool on hot nights, consider Corkcicle's Classic Stemless Insulated Wine Tumblers (\$30, corkcicle.com). And check out Tossware glasses (\$17 per 12-pack, tossware.com)—they're shatterproof, recyclable, and made from BPA-free, single-use water bottles. "They can't go in the dishwasher, but you can use them a few times and not feel bad about tossing them," Critchell says.

### CLOTH INSTEAD OF PAPER NAPKINS

While you're working at reducing waste, you might swap out paper napkins for cloth ones such as the 12-pack of Ramanta Home 20x20-inch Cotton Dinner Napkins, on the facing page. Just toss them in the wash after each use and agree to be casual about wrinkles. "Napkins that retain full wrinkle-free status aren't absorbent—they do nothing but smear food around," says Chris Mooney, chief marketing and merchandising officer at Welspun, a global textile company. Look for cloth napkins that have little or no polyester.



### Easy Transport Solutions

#### TROLLEY

◀ **Foundstone Calla Straight Bar Cart** \$150 [wayfair.com](http://wayfair.com)

#### COOLER CART

**Vineego Gray Resin Rolling Cooler Cart**  
\$270  
[lowes.com](http://lowes.com)



#### TRAY WITH HANDLES

**14"x20" Natural Woven Tray with Handles**  
\$23 [target.com](http://target.com)



## Limit the lifting

### TRAYS AND TROLLEYS

Eating alfresco can be relaxing, but carrying all the dishes, food, and drink in and out of the house? Not so much. A handled tray can help you carry more, minimizing the back-and-forth. Opt for rattan, like the one at right, which is lightweight and comfortable to carry. (A safety tip from Bowser: Carry your tray slightly to the side, rather than in front of you, so that you can see your feet; it increases stability.) A rolling cart can carry even more, especially if it has holders for drinks and glasses that prevent toppling in transit. Some—such as the Foundstone Calla Straight Bar Cart, above—come with a liftoff tray to make the transfer to the table easier. Just be sure that whatever trolley you choose is easy to maneuver over your threshold, Bowser says.

### ENERGY-SAVER: A ROLLING COOLER

Tall versions, like the Vineego Cooler Cart above, are preferable—they don't require thirsty guests to bend or squat. Look for one with a shelf, where you can keep glasses and bottle holders; locking wheels (essential, says Bowser); and a drain for easy emptying.

### CR'S TOP PICKS GRILLS

#### 3. Look for buildup on the underside of the grill lid.

What's there is carbon, and it can flake off when you slam the lid, producing a shower of ashlike bits. Scrape it off with your grill-cleaning tool, then wipe it down with a cloth soaked in soapy water.



✓ **Weber Q 2200**  
**540600001**  
**Grill \$250**

**71**  
OVERALL SCORE



✓ **Cuisinart**  
**GAS2256AS**  
**Grill \$300**

**68**  
OVERALL SCORE



✓ **Even Embers**  
**GAS8560AS**  
**Grill \$400**

**78**  
OVERALL SCORE