



CHOOSING YOUR OUTDOOR FURNISHINGS

CREATE A WELCOMING SPACE FOR ENJOYING PATIO LIVING AT ITS BEST

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It used to be that having a garden was all about choosing and maintaining the plants. But over the past few years, we've started to envision our gardens as much more than a place to toil.

As outdoor furniture lines have become more elaborate and weather resistant and new products and embellishments like patio heaters or fire pits have allowed us to linger outdoors even on a cool evening, our focus has definitely shifted.

Today, it's all about garden style. A whole new attitude about relaxing in yards, on patios, or on decks is changing the way we design, furnish, and entertain in our exterior spaces, making it a true extension of our homes. Outdoor living means creating that extra living room to use when the weather is fine—for everything from just sitting with our feet up and reading a book to entertaining family and friends.

How you furnish your patio depends on your personal style and, of course, your budget. But there are so many materials from which to choose—from durable, sustainably farmed hardwoods and cast powder-coated aluminum to hefty wrought iron and rattan—in styles ranging from sophisticated to rustic and contemporary to traditional, that one will be just right for you.

Here are a few considerations on materials:

If you're looking for the most durable furniture that will long outlive you and require the least amount of maintenance, you'll want hand-wrought iron. The Woodard Furniture Company began production of wrought iron tables and chairs back in the 1930s for fine residential gardens on the eastern seaboard, and the company still produces iron, in addition to aluminum and wicker. Vintage wrought iron—it's out there and it's very valuable—can sometimes be scored at tag sales. Keep your radar up for unique pieces, such as rolling tea carts, chaise lounges, and double gliders, which are no longer made. With a fresh coat of black paint and updated cushions in a colorful outdoor fabric, you'll have a brand new heirloom.

The heavy construction of teak makes it another perfect long-term investment. With time and a bit of maintenance, teak will turn soft silver gray. This requires an annual cleaning with a solution of bleach water to remove winter grime. But the effort is worth it, as this furniture only gets a more beautiful patina with age.

With wicker and rattan, you can achieve a look of relaxed comfort that is both fresh and nostalgic.

Mid-century rattan has a tropical feel and can be outfitted with oversized print cushions to great effect, and wicker has a timeless charm—it is one of the oldest styles, traced back to the seventeenth century—and is still popular today.

One of the most exciting aspects of the outdoor furnishings craze is the wide availability of new space-age finishes, like those from Maine Cottage Furniture, a company that takes classical shapes in sofas and chairs and makes them bulletproof to the elements. Furniture that looks like wicker is made of extruded plastic resin or, for the environmentally conscious, woven from water hyacinth harvested in Thailand, where the plant is considered a nuisance.

If you're in the market for inexpensive and low maintenance, plastic is a great option. It's lightweight and comes in cheerful colors that are ideal for families with young children. Although it may not last forever, plastic is stain resistant and durable and can be moved around with ease.

Irrespective of the style you choose, your main considerations should always be quality and comfort. If you love to entertain, look for a table that is a minimum of sixty inches long, which will accommodate six chairs. Some tables have expandable leaves built in and can slide out when your crowd expands. Then augment your seating with chairs that stack or fold for storage. By adding accessories like cushions, outdoor carpeting, and lighting—from candle chandeliers to classically shaped floor lamps that have waterproof shades—you'll create an elegant outdoor living and dining room to entertain in.

You may want to consider hiring an "exterior designer" to help you integrate furnishings and colors of your interiors to bring the outdoors in and vice versa. The benefits of using one of these experts are many, from properly scaling the furniture to your available space to selecting from myriad durable outdoor fabrics that shrug off rain and are fade-proof in even the hottest sun yet look like they belong indoors. ■

A Garden-Furniture Checklist

Remember that you'll own your outdoor furniture for a very long time, so it pays to think carefully about your purchase. Ask yourself:

What sort of outdoor experience do I want to create?

How much space do I have?

What's my budget?

Do I prefer modern or traditionally styled furniture?

Can I be bothered with maintenance?