



WHAT'S TRENDING

By Lindsey Getz

Contractors are getting requests for more elaborate outdoor living areas that can be used in the colder months.

Although the economy has improved and the housing market has bounced back, it seems that many homeowners are still staying put and investing money back into their own homes. In terms of hardscaping trends, that has encouraged the evolution of the outdoor living area.

LARGER AND FASTER. Many contractors say they're getting even more job requests than before for outdoor living areas and patios. In fact, some, like Beds & Borders Landscape based in Eden, Minn., are having trouble keeping up with the demand. "The popularity of the outdoor living space has only grown," says owner Mike Hart. "It continues to be the biggest hardscape trend."

What has changed is the project size and

complexity. "Customers want to push the limit and do more and more," says John Peterson, design and sales manager for Exscape Designs in Chesterland, Ohio.

"When this trend first emerged the spaces were pretty basic. Today, they include everything from full kitchens to audio/video and televisions."

Joe Ehrenreich, general manager of Young's Landscape Management in Moorestown, N.J., says seat walls and fire pits are the big request from their clients. "In fact, these two features are often paired together," he says. "Kitchen areas are also very popular from basic enclosures used to dress-up a portable grill to complex arrangements with multiple appliances."

Besides getting bigger and more complex, some contractors say another current trend

has been that projects are now more likely to be completed in one shot as opposed to phases. "We're seeing a shift back to larger projects and less 'phasing' of a master plan," Ehrenreich says. "Whether this is a positive change in the economic climate or just an extension of the 'stay-cation' trend, we are unsure but it's been a pleasant change."

In Belle Mead, N.J., Chris Demato, owner of Rock Bottom Landscaping & Fencing says any hardscaping element which will allow clients to get even more usage out of their space is an easier sell. For him, that has equated to fire features and covered hardscaped areas, which allow homeowners to use the outdoor space in the cold or inclement weather.

MATERIAL MATTERS. When it comes to material, Ehrenreich says he's also been happy to see a return to timeless materials like natural stone for walls and brick and bluestone for step treads and paved surfaces. While the request for permeable pavers is still minimal in his area, Ehrenreich predicts that the demand for these products will soon be on the rise. "Government requirements and enforcement of impervious site coverage and stormwater runoff regulations are going to create a market and demand," he says.

Peterson says he has seen some requests for permeable pavers in the commercial market, but it hasn't made its way into residential yet. What drives material trends for Exscape's clients is typically a combination of style and also price point and budget. "Natural stone is the way to go for a client with a bigger budget, but not everyone can afford it," he says.

Demato says although natural stone is popular, the cost can be a deterrent. He says the continuing improvements to manufactured products have driven their popularity. "Brick pavers are probably the most popular choice in material for hardscape surfaces like patios, walkways, and driveways," Demato says. "The manufacturers have done a really great job with updating styles that mimic natural stone surfaces at a less expensive price." **L&L**