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The Benefits Of Water Features In Garden Landscapes

Many homeowners aspire to make their homes appear as beautiful and welcoming as possible. Exterior renovations may be high on homeowners' to-do lists, and landscaping is oftentimes a key component of those projects. When planning gardens, homeowners may benefit by considering more than just flowers and shrubs while giving thought to other elements that can breathe vitality into their landscape designs. Water features can do just that, as such features provide more than just visual appeal.

- Aesthetic appeal: Water elements stand out against the greenery and foliage and can be used to create focal points around the garden or yard. A single fountain can draw the eye, while a trickling stream or waterfall can deliver water to various spots in the landscape.
- Soothing sound: Rain drops on a rooftop or waves lapping on a shoreline elicit feelings of harmony and relaxation. Water features can bring that gentle sound close to home, further enhancing the ambiance.
- Brings texture: Water has its own unique and fluid texture that can provide stark contrast to blades of grass or the hard lines of architectural elements, such as pergolas or retaining walls. A pond or fountain can soften lines.
- Enhance the natural ecosystem: Water features can attract wildlife to a property. Birds may visit to take a quick sip, and dragonflies are sure to dart and hover over the shimmering ripples. Inviting natural wildlife to the yard can add hours of entertainment by enjoying the animals and insects.



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•Remedy problem areas: Rather than fighting with the landscape, homeowners can adapt it. An area of the yard prone to soggy conditions or flooding can be transformed into a pond or waterfall to work with natural surroundings.

•Foster a passion: Many people turn to water features so they can explore the hobby of nurturing an outdoor aquarium. Koi ponds are relatively easy to install and maintain, and the vibrant fish add visual appeal.

•Add a personal touch: Water features are as unique as the homeowners who create them. To set landscaping apart from neighbors' homes, homeowners can add fountains, ponds or flowing water elements to their proper-

ties. Decorative water features also can be melded with pools and spas to help these manmade recreational areas seem like they were carved right out of the natural landscape. Water features can take landscapes to the next level with sounds, texture, movement, and beauty.



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The Basics Of Mulching

Mulch is available in various forms. Like other land and garden products, mulch can go a long way toward helping plants thrive. Mulch comprises just about any material that is spread over the surface of soil. Its purpose is primarily to help soil retain moisture. In addition, mulch can staunch weed growth, keep soil cool, improve the aesthetics of garden beds, and even improve soil nutrient composition. When the right mulch is chosen, it can reduce the amount of time homeowners spend watering and weeding their gardens and insulate plants from dramatic changes in weather. Gardeners may not realize that mulch also can prevent garden soil from becoming overly compacted. This can mean beneficial earthworms can move easily through the soil, creating channels for water and depositing their nutrient-rich waste products. Gardeners can choose organic or inorganic mulch. Organic mulches are derived from natural materials that will decompose over time, lending organic matter as well as various nutrients to the soil. Organic mulches also may contain beneficial microorganisms that can fight against plant diseases. Inorganic mulches may be made of stones, landscape fabrics and plastic. Both types will need to be amended or replaced as they degrade. Those who want the most environmentally-friendly mulching materials can choose all-natural mulches instead of synthetic alternatives.

To work effectively, mulch should be applied in a 2- to 3-inch layer of material, state experts at Old World Garden Farms. It's the ideal amount to retain soil moisture and suppress weed growth without choking plants. Also, mulch that is too thick may make it impossible for water to penetrate, or it may prevent the soil from airing out, causing continuously wet conditions that lead to root and stem rot. The University of Connecticut Home & Garden Ed. Ctr. says mulch should not be placed directly against plant crowns or tree bases, as this can promote the development of disease. It may also serve as a habitat for bark- and stem-eating rodents. The center also suggests watering newly installed bark or wood mulches to prevent fungi from colonizing in dry mulch and causing problems like a water-repellent surface on the mulch.

Home landscapers considering mulch types may find that compost, manure and grass clippings (from nonpesticide-treated lawns) can be inexpensive and versatile in garden beds. Newspaper may also be effective. They can be covered with other organic mulch, like shredded bark, for more visual appeal. Mulch can be a versatile asset when doing gardening projects around home landscapes. And the benefits are more than just aesthetic.

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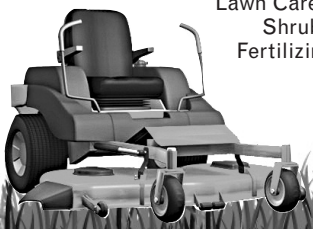
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Items To Improve Outdoor Living Spaces

The popularity of outdoor living spaces has been growing for years. A 2014 study from the home remodeling and design platform Houzz found that 56 percent of homeowners were making updates to improve their yards for entertaining. Similarly, nearly 60 percent of architectural practices surveyed by the American Institute of Architects in 2016 said outdoor living spaces were popular features in the homes they built.

Outdoor living spaces may also be sound investments for homeowners looking to improve the resale value of their properties. According to Remodeling magazine's 2017 "Cost vs. Value" report, outdoor living spaces returned between 55 and 71 percent of homeowners' initial investments at resale.

When planning an outdoor living space, homeowners with ample backyards have much to work with. However, to make the most of the space while simultaneously hoping to get as strong a return on their investments as possible, homeowners should look to create spaces that offer broad appeal and are not too personalized. The following are some popular outdoor living space features homeowners may want to consider.

OUTDOOR KITCHENS: allow homeowners to prepare more than just traditional backyard barbecue fare. A standalone charcoal grill in the backyard might get the job done, but a built-in gas grill complete with burners and surrounding granite countertop makes for a more functional outdoor entertaining space.

WARMING FEATURES: that can keep homeowners and their guests warm after the sun sets include outdoor fireplaces and firepits. Such features can provide a focal point in the backyard while also extending the outdoor living season into autumn and even early winter.

PORCH SPACE: Outdoor living spaces are often found in the backyard, but homeowners with bigger front yards than backyards may want to expand or open their porch spaces to create more space outside. Porch swings and rocking chairs provide a great place to relax, and porch spaces are covered, meaning homeowners can continue to enjoy time outside even when it begins to rain. Outdoor living spaces are growing in popularity. Homeowners who want to capitalize on this trend can do so in various ways.

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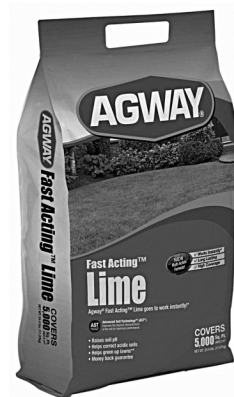
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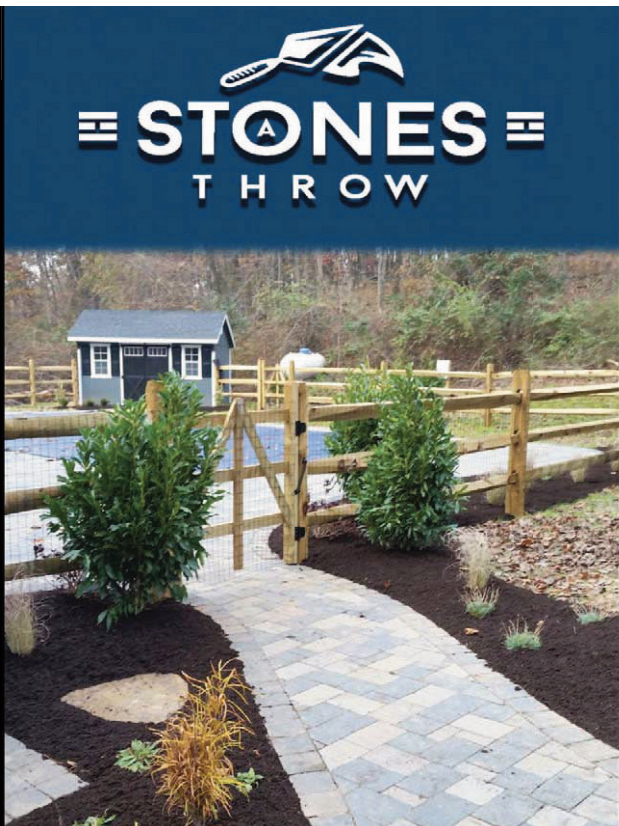
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Avoid Invasive Plant Species

Intuition may suggest all plants that provide habitats for wildlife and produce oxygen for the atmosphere are good no matter where they are planted. However, non-native plant species that are introduced into areas across North America can pose significant threats to an ecosystem. Foreign plants can wreak havoc on native plant species and agricultural industries. Scores of plants are aggressively invading certain areas of the country. Invasive species are introduced largely due to human action, such as planting non-native plants. Plants also may be introduced through boating and fishing. Wind and rain may introduce non-native plants to a particular region, while some plants are introduced through animals.


The organization PlayCleanGo.org says that not all non-native plants are harmful and some can be beneficial. But non-native plants that take over and cause severe damage in areas outside of their normal range are considered to be invasive, and efforts must be made to keep invasives under control.

Gaining awareness of the pathways through which invasives spread can help people avoid introducing invasive species. Some invasive plants are very attractive and they may be for sale at some garden centers, but such plants should be avoided for the benefit of local ecosystems. In addition, weeds and seeds can be hidden in potting mixes or lawn and garden products and essentially sneak their way into regions where they do not belong.

Homeowners who learn to recognize invasive species can decrease their risk of introducing such plants to their properties. The following are some common invasive species:

- Garlic mustard
- Cotton thistle
- Mayweed
- Purple loosestrife
- Norway maple
- Japanese honeysuckle
- Yellow rocket
- English ivy
- Australian pine
- Kudzu
- Oxeye daisy
- Autumn olive
- Bermuda grass
- Paper mulberry
- Ground ivy
- Chinese privet

People can learn more about invasive species by speaking with lawn and garden professionals.



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How To Control Common Spring Pests

Just when winter thaws out and people are anxious to enjoy the blooming flowers and luscious lawns of spring, pesky pests can appear and impact comfort levels and safety. Many pests resume their levels of activity as spring draws closer and temperatures warm up. The presence of these insects and rodents may cause problems in and around a home, which makes it essential to recognize them and avoid issues. The following are some of the more common spring pests and how to remedy infestations.

PAVEMENT ANTS: are some of the most common pests residents encounter inside and outside of

their homes. These ants are light brown to black with appendages that are lighter than the rest of their bodies. Small in stature, pavement ants have parallel lines on their heads and thorax, according to pest extermination company Orkin. Although pavement ants nest outdoors, they can enter homes through small crevices in search of food scraps. Their large colonies may not disappear until treatment is introduced. Keep foods in tightly sealed containers, clear counters and floors of crumbs, and address water sources, such as leaks. Pesticides may be needed in extreme conditions.

FLEAS: are tiny, jumping, biting pests that must find a host upon which to live. As ectoparasites, they feed on blood while living on the body of living hosts. Pets can bring fleas inside the yard and home in warm weather. According to the University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program, flea larvae develop more quickly at higher temperatures. At normal room temperatures, the entire life cycle of a flea is about 18 days. Several flea control products are available to control fleas on cats and dogs. There also may be powders and sprays to alleviate flea infestations in the home. Vacuuming is also very effective in killing larvae in the carpet and at picking up adults.

WASPS: An errant wasp, hornet or yellow jacket may have survived winter and ridden out the colder temperatures within a home. Once the weather warms, queens will begin to look for places to lay eggs and establish colonies. Treating areas where wasps are seen entering and leaving the home is key. Seal holes as soon as possible. Although wasps help control other

insect populations, their painful stings and potentially aggressive nature can make them challenging to have around a home. If a nest is found, hire a professional to remove it.

SPIDERS: Some spiders are not harmful enough to humans and pets to be much of a problem. In fact, spiders can be helpful to have around to control the populations of other insects. Still, many homeowners would prefer these web-slinging friends remain outdoors. Therefore, sealing cracks in a home's foundation and repairing small openings around windows and doors can help keep spiders out. Also, alleviating moisture issues in basements, garages or attics may keep out other bugs that would be prey to spiders. Homeowners can take the steps necessary to cut down on pests in and around their homes.

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Introduce Earthworms Into The Garden

Gardeners eager to revitalize their lawns and gardens may spend hundreds of dollars on tools and products designed to improve soil and growing conditions. Although many of these items can be advantageous, gardeners also may want to look to nature's best garden helpers: earthworms.

It is believed that nearly 3,000 different types of earthworms inhabit the planet. Worms have been around for hundreds of millions of years.

Worms can be seen as bait dangling on fishing lines or as meals for red-breasted robins. But these subterranean dwellers play their biggest role beneath the soil.

Earthworms move through dirt as they search for food. The worms consume particles in the soil, helping to recycle materials like dead leaves, plant parts, decaying animals, and feces. Through their travels, worms also serve to aerate the soil. Worms bring the subsoil closer to the surface and mix it with the topsoil. Earthworms' castings also help naturally fertilize the areas in which they reside. The slimy mucus that worms leave behind contains nitrogen, which also helps to amend the soil.

The University of Illinois Extension says most earthworms found, particularly in North America, can only grow so long, even though some worms seem like they stretch forever underneath the ground.

Depending on the type of worm and how many segments it has, as well as its age and ability to get nutritious foods, worms typically reach only a few inches in length, offers National Geographic. There are some anomalies, however. The Oregon giant earthworm is one of the largest earthworms found in North America, growing to more than three feet in length. That worm is very rare, however. In 2016, a 16-inch-long earthworm was discovered in England and became part of the collection at the Natural History Museum in London. Some Australian and South American earthworms are known to grow much larger.

Worms need the correct mix of oxygen, moisture and favorable temperatures to survive. If they do not have these components, they will seek them out elsewhere.

Because of the many benefits earthworms provide, they can be a boon to landscapes.

Awnings Can Make Outdoor Spaces More Comfortable

Many homeowners are eager to step outdoors upon the return of warm weather. Outdoor living spaces have grown in popularity as more and more homeowners embrace opportunities to entertain and lounge around in their yards.

Outdoor entertaining areas can be great, but such spaces may go unused when summer sun makes it uncomfortable to spend time outdoors. But a retractable awning can change all that. Homeowners often find awnings can be worthwhile investments that can be beneficial both inside and outside of the home.



INCREASE USABLE YARD SPACE:

Awnings can create privacy and establish boundaries for outdoor living areas. Place an awning over a deck, tables and chairs, or an entire patio area. Some people like to install awnings over a portion of their pools to provide shade for those who want to escape the sun's rays. Motorized awnings can be retracted with the push of a button, which can help homeowners with physical limitations.

PROTECT AGAINST SUN DAMAGE: Awnings provide excellent protection against sun damage, as they can shield outdoor furniture from direct sunlight, helping to reduce the chances for discoloration or fading.

REDUCE AIR CONDITIONING COSTS: In addition to shading outdoor living areas, smaller awnings can be placed over southern- and western-facing windows, shielding interiors against the sun's rays. In turn, this may reduce reliance on air conditioners.

EXPAND GARDENING POSSIBILITIES: Some plants require very specific

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light conditions to grow. Awnings can protect shade-loving plants from harsh sunlight and filter the sun for plants that require indirect light. They can be placed over a patio container garden or permanent garden structure. ADD VALUE FOR BUYERS: For those who may be selling their homes soon, awning may help them receive top dollar. Today's buyers want houses that have attractive and functional exteriors, and an awning can provide that competitive advantage over similar homes in the neighborhood. When renovating outdoor areas, homeowners should not overlook awnings that can make outdoor living spaces more livable.

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