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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Wednesday, April 25, 2007 - VOL. CCXLIX NO. 109

*** \$1.00

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Outdoor Rooms Are Really In

By AMY HOAK

It's one of her favorite rooms in the house, where Katherine Whiteside often cooks and entertains.

Half inside and half out, the outdoor room is outfitted with the gardening writer's appliances and cherished barbecue. Patio heaters in the arts-and-crafts style complement her circa-1920 home, while an L-shaped couch provides seating for guests.

Such a room may be expected in warm-weather states, where outdoor living is a year-round experience. Ms. Whiteside's house, however, is located in upstate New York.

"People are really hanging on to outdoor spaces," said Ms. Whiteside, author of "The Way We Garden Now." That holds true even in areas like hers, where cold and snowy weather makes an annual appearance. The trick is protecting the room from the elements so it can be used in three or four seasons, she said.

Outdoor rooms are grabbing the attention of more new-home buyers, according to Dominick Tringali, president and chief executive of **Dominick Tringali Architects**. His firm is based in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and two-thirds of his work is done in the Midwest.

At the International Builders' Show this year, where Mr. Tringali spoke on the topic, companies selling components for outdoor rooms could be found throughout the expo. Model homes had outdoor fireplaces as the centerpieces of covered patios.

"Almost eight or nine out of 10 houses have some kind of outdoor feature," he said of his homes. The trend that began in high-end homes is becoming popular even in starter homes, he added. And Mr. Tringali thinks this trend has not nearly hit its peak.

Part of the reason homeowners are paying more attention to their outdoor rooms goes hand in hand with the trend of home downsizing, Mr. Tringali said. Today, many homeowners are seeking quality over quantity of square footage, making better use of the space they do have and looking to connect the inside and outside areas.

"People are downsizing homes, but they're making the house more usable," he said.

An extra benefit in an era of steep energy prices and greater attention to conservation is that rooms existing beyond a home's exterior walls don't need to be heated or cooled—except, perhaps, when they are being used, Mr. Tringali said. In colder climates, the outdoor areas are often at least partially covered and use heating techniques such as heated floors, he added.

On top of that, there's the trend of Americans spending more time at home, as found in a recent survey on outdoor living spaces conducted by the Propane Education & Research Council. Fifty percent of those surveyed said they were spending more time at home than they were five years ago; relaxation and the desire to spend more time outside were the top reasons to create an outdoor room, according to the survey.

Research by the group in 2005 found that 35% of homeowners had a finished outdoor room, and 34% planned to design and purchase one by the following spring. The more recent survey found that nearly two-thirds of the households surveyed owned a gas grill; freestanding grills often were their first outdoor-appliance purchase.

Last year was a good year for the grilling industry. According to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, more than 17 million

grills were shipped in 2006, a 15% increase from the 2005 total. There were more grills shipped in 2006 than during any year since 1985.

Perhaps it is Martha Stewart and the greater overall media attention to the home that is responsible for this trend of outdoor decorating, said Rob Schwing, vice president of marketing and product development at **Char-Broil**, a grill company.

Suddenly, the outdoors, once a space akin to the garage or basement and controlled by dear old dad, became something to decorate, Mr. Schwing said. "It's an easy room to deal with in terms of decorating, and you can decorate across the spectrum," he said.

The growth in popularity of the Food Network also has played a role in the trend, exposing consumers to outdoor kitchens and cooking techniques that go beyond the simple grilling of classic hot dogs and hamburgers, Mr. Schwing added.

For Ms. Whiteside, the outdoor room became "extra found space" in which to relax and entertain. Her covered porch, once used for storing firewood, was transformed when French doors were installed to link the outside to the inside.

"A lot of houses have porches, and people tend to sit out there Memorial Day and the Fourth of July and Labor Day, and then cover the wicker with plastic," Ms. Whiteside said. By creating barriers from the elements, a space already found on many homes can become a room.

There are several things to consider when designing an outdoor room, Ms. Whiteside said.

The first two are ambiance and privacy, attributes that will make or break the appeal of the room. It's also important to consider the buggy issue of pests, including mosquitoes. Unlike the bug zappers of years past, quieter

models are now on the market, she said, and at some houses, screened-in areas provide a barrier from insects.

Perhaps the bigger investments to the space are those that address temperature control and food preparation. The outdoor kitchen, especially if it includes a range and a sink, is best if it's under a roof, she said. She uses propane heaters to provide warmth when the days get shorter and the weather turns colder.

Other popular items in these rooms are outdoor fireplaces, water features and spas, and fire pits where people gather at night, Mr. Tringali said. Affordable models of these products are helping more homeowners incorporate an outdoor room into their homes.

For example, a new pizza oven by **Tuscan Ovens**, set to reach stores in June, was created as an affordable alternative to existing outdoor ovens, said owner and chef Iris O'Brien. In addition to operating as an oven, the product can function as a grill or fireplace, she said.

The cost of the pizza oven is about \$5,000, but a traditional brick oven can cost from \$10,000 to \$20,000, she said. The company is in the process of developing a smaller model for the mass market, with the hope of releasing it next year, she added.

Some elements are less obvious and somewhat nonessential additions to the extra room outside the house, like outdoor rugs that add a cozy touch.

"Today, just about anything for interior decorating is available for our outdoor spaces, including rugs," said Laurie Rudd, creative director for **The HammockSource**, in an e-mail interview. The company offers an outdoor-rug line made with DuraCord, a synthetic fiber that is weather resistant but engineered to be soft like cotton.

"There are even companies that provide outdoor art," using weather-resistant materials to create pieces of décor that resemble canvas paintings, she said.