Amazing Spaces

The Art of Gorgeous Outdoor Retreats

PLUS
Crafting Built-in Seating
Glorious Hedges
WHEN YOU HAVE free-standing furniture, you need room to circulate around it on all four sides,” says landscape designer Judy Kameon of Elysian Landscapes. “But with built-ins, you can take what’s a relatively small area and create a really generous amount of seating.” Building a bench onto a wall or fence also helps make the transition between existing structures and the landscape seamless.

And it’s not just for the spatially challenged. “Built-in seating is a way to define the architecture of the space,” says Jon Handley of New York’s Pulltab Design. “By using fixed seating areas you establish an anchor point that helps to define an area, be it for a group of people or a hideaway for an individual.”

Obviously, built-ins are a long-term commitment and may not be the best choice for someone who regularly hosts both outdoor dinners and cocktail parties with mingling guests. “It’s a fixed item,” says Courtney McRitchard, principal of Three Sixty Design, a landscape architecture firm in Denver. “So sometimes it can be too limiting for a space that requires more flexibility.” A recent upsurge of stylish, functional outdoor furniture has some garden professionals gravitating toward the versatility of movable seating. “There is so much amazing outdoor furniture and so many fabrics to choose from today,” says New York landscape designer Hal Goldberg. “To me, that’s just more interesting than built-ins.” But there is space for compromise: A built-in bench on the border of a deck, garden, or patio, for instance, can double as a dining area when combined with a portable dining table and chairs.

While built-in seating is there to stay, its accoutrements are not — pillows, cushions, finishes, and decorative accessories can be swapped out to freshen a space. Reworking the accompanying plantings can overhaul a space if it begins to feel stale, as can adding an arbor and climbing vines or exotic potted plants.

The true beauty of built-in seating stretches far beyond its ability to maximize outdoor living space or extend an architectural structure to the landscape. It provides a place to nestle into the retreat we so lovingly tend to and survey our work from the inside out. “Using built-ins gives the feeling of taking a chair and plopping it down in a garden bed,” says Kameon. “I think it’s lovely.”

FOR FOCUS

Though built-in seating areas can serve as anchoring points on their own, they’re often used in conjunction with focal elements like fire or water. An outdoor fireplace, fire pit, or interesting fountain naturally draws people outdoors, and surrounding these features with seating ensures people will linger, enjoying both the comfort and beauty of the outdoor space and the company that congregates there. Using built-ins instills areas that include these elements with a sense of permanence, marking them as a tried-and-true gathering place whether the outdoor space is open or partially enclosed.

In his Venice, California, residence, seen at right, architect David Hertz chose to include built-in seating in an outdoor room with a fire feature centerpiece to ensure “the area was built into the architecture rather than furniture being adjacent to the architecture.” A fire pit or fountain, which can occasionally seem jarring when alone in a landscape or outdoor area, can be made congruous with the addition of built-ins. “It’s a way to make the elements and materials in a space flow into one another,” says Courtney McRitchard. The fire pit at top left is made of Pennsylvania bluestone, as are the benches, hardscape, and the interior flooring, blurring the boundary between indoors and out, says LeeAnn Suen of Marmol Radziner, the Los Angeles architecture firm that renovated the 1950s ranch home. Sinking the seating area not only creates a cozy retreat in an otherwise wide-open space but also ensures uninterrupted views of the canyon below and the city beyond.
The walls, seating, and table are concrete and wood framed with a surface of pigmented Venetian plaster. David Hertz says the goal was to build an environment conducive to holding conversation outside and mostly at night.

Hertz's unusual fire pit — lava rocks mounded over gas jets — adds a focal point to the outdoor room as well as warmth and allure. He positioned it opposite a courtyard water feature to “express the duality of fire and water.”