



Well designed firepits and fireplaces can extend your outdoor season.

Burning Questions

Things to consider before installing an outdoor fireplace.

❧ **APRIL NIGHTS ARE PERFECT** for enjoying time with friends and family under the stars around a backyard fire pit, or pulling up a comfortable chair in front of an outdoor fireplace. What kind of planning goes into creating a backyard gathering spot and what kind of maintenance is needed to keep a flaming focal point safe and burning bright? We asked experts Jeff Gaffney of Tabor Group Landscape and Chris Becker, owner of Twin City Fireplace.

"The first thing we like to ask is do you want wood-burning or gas?" Gaffney says. "Then you need to decide whether you want a simple fire pit or something more elaborate."

Becker says he prefers an outdoor fireplace because "a fireplace makes a statement." But he recognizes that not everyone wants to make that level of investment. And sometimes practical considerations can come into play when deciding size and location.

"Setbacks from structures, fences and property lines can make it hard to site a bigger fireplace if you are working on a smaller city lot," Becker says.

How long does construction take? Gaffney says there are a couple of general time frames. "It could be just a few hours if you want a basic fire pit like you'd find in a campground—just a steel ring in the ground." If you want to build an outdoor fireplace, that can take several days, depending on the complexity and size of the structure.

When you're building even a smaller structure in our climate it is necessary to dig footings that extend below

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CHRIS BECKER

the frost line. "Without adequate footings we can't guarantee or warranty our work," Becker says. But once they are in place, maintenance isn't a big issue.

"Masonry materials are living and breathing; they are always pulling moisture in and letting it out. They weather, but there isn't much you need to do to maintain them," Becker says. "Fifteen or 20 years down the road you might need tuckpointing, but that's usually all. And, when you have a gas fireplace outside, I like people to put covers on them in the winter to keep water out of mechanicals."

In addition to placement and maintenance, price is also a determining factor for most people. "There's a wide range in price for outdoor fireplaces and fire pits," Gaffney says. "We want to make sure we ask the right questions to be sure this is a good long-term investment for the client."

Of course, there are things to consider beyond maintenance, building codes and price—there are questions about the style of the structure as well. Should it match the architectural style of the house? Should it be rustic or sleekly modern? Becker says that most folks in the Twin Cities want a more rustic look, but he is increasingly being asked to do more modern fireplaces with clean lines to coordinate with the prairie modern style of home design.

"Even though we don't live in a year-round outdoor-room kind of climate," Becker says, "these projects do extend your outdoor season and they add value to your house. A well-designed and well-finished patio with a fireplace is strong selling point for a lot of buyers these days." ■

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