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Outdoor Entertaining

Local style gurus offer tips for alfresco soirees.

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Colorful serving pieces made of melamine are ideal for outdoor entertaining and more environmentally friendly than their disposable counterparts. Photo courtesy of Ann O'Shields

By Marilyn Campbell

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The mild temperatures that usher in late spring and early summer beckon many outdoors for alfresco parties. Whether held on a patio, deck or veranda, the necessary logistics for coordinating even a simple gathering can be daunting.

Local tastemakers have unveiled the latest in elegant accessories, colorful furnishings and creative strategies for transforming a simple outdoor party into a chic and elegant endeavor. From serveware and centerpieces to lighting and cushions, style gurus explain how you can keep your cool while hosting a warm weather event.

"We love using our indoor-outdoor rugs as the starting point for decorating outdoor spaces," said Ann O'Shields of The Nest Egg in Fairfax. "We have a huge selection of patterns and colors from Dash & Albert that are perfect for grounding your space and creating an area to entertain."

Marrying comfort and style in outdoor seating can transform virtually any space into a festive oasis, say designers. Sunbrella fabrics are the ideal textile for upholstered furniture and throw pillows, says O'Shields.

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Outdoor pillows by Elaine Smith are the top choice of interior designer and home furnishings boutique owner Victoria Sanchez of Victoria at Home in Old Town Alexandria. She says that the cushions are polished enough to adorn a home's interior, but hefty enough to withstand exterior elements. "The pillows have grommets and embellishments, but are machine washable and can sit outside," said Sanchez. "Something like that can do a lot to spiff up the same old furniture and set a tone for a festive environment."

When it comes to place settings and serveware, resist the urge to bring indoor dinnerware outside, eschew the disposable varieties, and instead opt for dinnerware made of melamine. "It is perfect for outdoor entertaining because it's durable and won't break if dropped," said Courtney Thomas of The Picket Fence in Burke. "A bright serving tray or bowl adds some fun to outdoor dining."

Whether from one's own garden or a favorite florist, no smartly dressed table is complete without fresh foliage. "Flowers go without saying," said Sanchez. "They add color, and when your guests walk in and see fresh flowers, it signals to them that the event is special and festive."

To create bouquets with bursts of vibrant summer colors, Evelyn Kirville of The Behnke Florist Shop in Potomac, Md. recommends graceful blossoms like lisianthus, iris, hydrangea and godetia. "These can all be used together. Godetia is very pretty and comes in cherry red, salmon and fuchsia," said Kirville.

When choosing a color scheme, try going back to the basics. "It goes back to color theory — stay with a color wheel," said Sanchez. "Opposites sides of the color wheel are always safe, like orange and blue."

Use lighting to create ambience. "Candles make great outdoor accessories, especially if you are entertaining at night," said Thomas. "Hang a few votive lanterns from nearby trees or use a row of smaller lanterns as a centerpiece on the table. Even placing a few tea lights on the table creates a warm glow."

Cold libations and melodies wafting through the air are summer soirée essentials. "For entertaining, it's always fun to have great music and refreshments which are fun to serve in buckets filled with ice and drinks," said O'Shields.

When in doubt, opt for understated décor. "Keep it simple and colorful," says Sanchez. "No one knows what you forgot. They only see what is there."



Photo courtesy of Victoria Sanchez

Outdoor pillows such as these by Elaine Smith are the top choice of interior designer and home furnishings boutique owner Victoria Sanchez who says that the cushions are polished enough to adorn a home's interior, but hefty enough to withstand exterior elements.

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