



THE FIFTH ROOM



Outdoor Kitchens Get Out Into The Kitchen

More retailers are offering services related to outdoor kitchens as the trend grows. Here are some helpful hints on what to offer customers.

Semco Distributing supplies Kitchen-Aid appliances and outdoor islands, like this one. Photo courtesy of Semco Distributing Inc.

by Ellen C. Wells

With the outdoor living concept becoming a more popular and profitable segment of garden retail, garden center owners and nursery/landscaping firms are searching for ways to get in on the action.

Cooking outdoors is not a new idea. Humans have been doing it since the beginning. A charcoal or gas grill has been a standard feature in back yards for generations, and mastering it is a source of pride for some. However, an outdoor kitchen moves beyond the bucket grill and card table prep and serving area. In addition to grill tops, homeowners are requesting warming burners, ovens, sinks, refrigeration units, and wet bars. These are often nestled into islands outfitted with cabinets and topped

off with counter tops and veneers. Some outdoor kitchens rival their indoor counterparts, right down to the microwaves and dishwashing units.

Nuts & Bolts Know-How

Chris Scalcione manages the residential redesign division at VerdeGo Design & Garden Center in Bunnell, Fla. There was a strong calling for outdoor kitchens in the region, and VerdeGo heeded the call for the products and services about two

years ago, Scalcione says. "I know there's a lot of larger companies getting into it," he notes. "Some of the smaller companies don't have the know-how and skill to put an outdoor kitchen together."

Which begs the question: How do you learn?

Scalcione, along with several co-workers, designs the outdoor kitchens and living spaces for VerdeGo's clients.

"It was a matter of hands-on work for 12 or 13 years. Now I just take the

Outdoor Kitchen Activity

An estimated 1.2 million households in the U.S. will purchase components for an outdoor kitchen in the next 12 months.

	Current Penetration	12-month Activity (All Households)	5-year Activity (All Households)
Grill	80%	23%	24%
Cabinets/storage	12%	9%	14%
Cook top/range	11%	11%	14%
Refrigerator	10%	10%	14%
Sink	7%	9%	11%
Countertop/island	6%	10%	15%

Source: "Outdoor Living: A New Landscape For Consumers." Created by StandPoint Marketing Research. To purchase a copy of the report, go to www.standpointgroup.com.



This design is an example of what VerdeGo Design & Garden Center in Bunnell, Fla., can do.

concepts I've learned and put them on paper." There's a basic level of knowledge designers and installers need, Scalcione suggests. "A lot of it has to do with propane, BTUs and tank size. Customers like to know how often they'll be filling their tanks and how much it will cost."

Scalcione also mentions the need to understand the basics of plumbing and electricity, even if sub-contractors will perform those portions of a project.

He hasn't seen any courses available in the industry that cover outdoor kitchen topics. "A course would be helpful just to learn what it takes to install outdoor kitchens, the specs needed to run plumbing and electric and how to hook into the drainage for these units." A course, Scalcione says, would be helpful to train his staff.

Pete Kuliga of Dellarocco's in Middleboro, Mass., agrees that knowledge goes a long way. The landscape and garden center company has been in the business for more than 20 years. Kuliga's outdoor kitchen projects have really taken off in the past two years, and Dellarocco's specialty is the installation of wet bars. "The biggest thing is to have the installation knowledge," Kuliga says. "It's very easy to show (a display), but you have to communicate with the homeowner to install it."

The design itself is just as important as knowing how to hook up the sink. Joe Kresl, a registered landscape architect and owner of Hawks Nursery, Wauwatosa,

Wis., says he turns to the West Coast for inspiration for outdoor kitchen projects, noting that California had a big jump on the trend. It also helps to have 20 landscape architects and designers on staff. "When you are in school learning about design, it's just expanding into another area of design," he says. "A lot of designing is looking at other people's ideas and blending them together into something that works best for the home and client." Not only do you design for the client, you design based on the existing landscape and also what the climate will permit, Kresl notes.

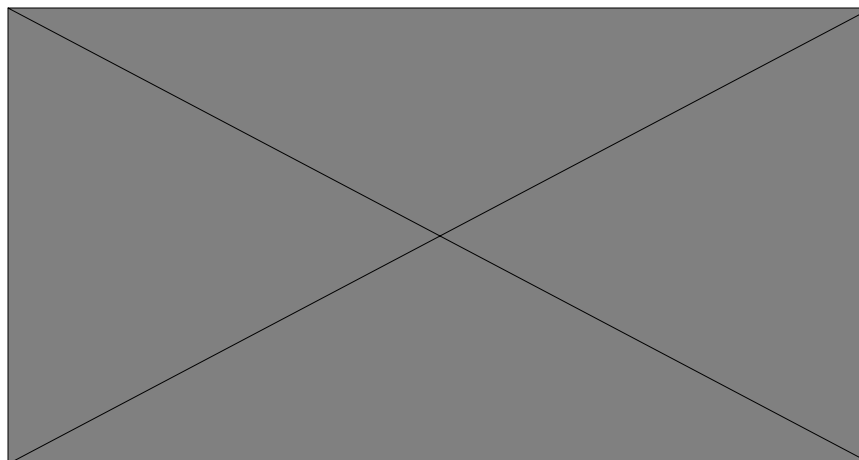
Basics To Bonuses

A basic understanding of the design process and installation procedures will help any garden retailer communicate

with customers interested in an outdoor kitchen. From there, the next step is offering the homeowner something they can get their hands on.

At the very least, Kresl suggests having a storybook or pictures of outdoor kitchens through which customers can flip to get a feel for what the potential opportunities are for their new outdoor kitchens.

Scalcione proposes that garden centers entering the outdoor kitchen market carry a line of pre-fabricated outdoor kitchen kits, leaving the sinks and refrigerators out of the offerings in the beginning. Scalcione carries a line of Firestone grills that come in a kit of two or three boxes. Customers can purchase the kits and assemble themselves. Many of the pre-fab grill kits on the market have nice-looking stone- or tile-faced cement





This is another example of a VerdeGo Design & Garden Center installation that can be done.

boards that screw together quite easily, resulting in a handsome island kitchen.

The next step, Kresl says, is putting a display kitchen in the garden center. “And if you really want to get serious about it,” Kresl says, “maybe put in more than one display kitchen of different styles and options.”

Dellarocco’s, Middleboro, Mass., is doing just that. With a 25 percent increase in retail business over the last three years, Dellarocco’s has just finished a \$300,000 makeover in their store, including kitchen displays.

“We were looking for something to put us up to the next level,” Kuliga says, “and outdoor kitchens is what we’re doing to get there, along with high-end slate products.”

As for those just getting into outdoor kitchens, they need “the right product and installation guides for the consumer,” Kuliga says. “That’s key. It’s time-consum-

ing, but the homeowners will be able to do it themselves.”

It’s An Investment

“With anything new, it’s an investment that ties up money and product,” Kuliga says. He suggests starting small with a grill unit or built-in refrigerator.

“I would go into it very slowly and minimally, building the business before you jump in and go too far,” Kresl says. He notes that not only is it an investment for your business, it’s an investment for the homeowner, as well – a customer with a lot of discretionary income. “Investing too much space or money into an outdoor kitchen display, I would proceed cautiously.”

Scalcione agrees. “You really have to hit a high-end clientele. The people looking to spend this kind of money on a very small space, you’ve got to have a lot of money to do so. The only con, really, is that you are limited in your market.”

Peripheral Views

The folks who supply the hard goods for outdoor kitchens are obviously keeping an eye on the outdoor kitchen trend, too.

“Viking is one of the few manufacturers that can offer a retailer a full outdoor kitchen,” notes Bob Woods, vice president of sales for Viking Range Corporation. “We offer grills with all of the most current features, as well as the cabinets to mount them in. Since you won’t find Viking in the big box stores, there is some excitement that surrounds the brand on the retail floor.” Woods adds that while Viking does offer products mounted on moveable carts as well, the company’s strength lies in its ability to make the back yard another room in the house.

Even Unilock, a manufacturer of paving stones and retaining walls, finds themselves associated with the outdoor kitchen trend. “There’s been more and more movement to building structures out of our products and that has morphed into surrounds for barbecue grills, fireplaces and fire pits,” says Matt Foley, Commercial Sales Consultant for Unilock. Right now, Foley notes that many of the projects using Unilock products are custom designs.

“We do see a future where we will do more for the consumer in pairing appliances and block combinations in the form of modules, which can be easily built with instructions,” he says. The customer will be able to pair up a different number of outdoor modules to create the outdoor kitchen they desire.

Semco Distributing, Inc. of Perryville, Mo., works with garden centers and landscape design firms to supply Kitchen-Aid outdoor appliances and modular outdoor islands from Islands by Design for their outdoor kitchen projects. Courtney Bohnert, marketing manager, says while standard island shapes are available, many of the projects are built on a custom basis. “You don’t see a lot of standard, cookie-cutter type designs,” she says. We’re seeing everything – pergolas on their islands, raised bars, elliptical designs, you name it.”

For those just entering the market, Bohnert suggests having a basic knowledge of the products. “You need to be able to answer questions about these products, and your distributor should be able to give you this information,” she says. Bohnert also recommends aligning your business with a distributor that can fulfill as many of your outdoor kitchen needs as possible for convenience. TGC

For More Resources

Another group of businesspeople that make a living based on the great outdoors – the American Society of Landscape Architects – can help shed some light onto how customers are settling in outdoors.

According to an informal survey of landscape architects conducted by the ASLA in December 2006, outdoor kitchens and bars top the list of their clients’ requests, along with outdoor fireplaces and fire pits (for more information visit www.asla.org).