

## Columns

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### Outdoor Ruminations

*Amanda Thomsen*

Outdoor rooms have been a really popular thing for a few years now, and yet, I rarely see them in the wild. And by “in the wild,” I mean in suburban backyards. They’re all over HGTV, home improvement magazines and Pinterest, but I rarely see them played out, and that includes in garden centers, too. All these years later and the most complete-feeling outdoor rooms I see are at the Big Box. We can do better, right?

Sometimes I see a few real outdoor rooms on Instagram or on blogs. Commenters go wild for them. I know they’re something people want, but somehow, they just aren’t coming across to our customers. Do they not translate? Is this a design issue? Are people phobic of Sunbrella fabric? (I am not. I feel passionately about Sunbrella fabric.) How can we help? How can we make them more attainable? What can we do to get past the hump that’s the table/chairs and umbrella set (and then calling it a day)? I am SO BORED of the table, chairs, umbrella set up. Are they bored, too? How do we get customers as comfortable buying an outdoor rug as they are buying an indoor rug?

An outdoor room is just a room you use often, with all the usual bells and whistles, but outside of your home. It’s simply an addition to your home, without construction and building permits and much of the added cost (but not free or else we wouldn’t be here discussing it). It has to be just as useable, as comfortable, as customized and as private as a room inside your home. We’re selling a lifestyle, a place to relax and enjoy life. A place to escape to when the house is too messy (this is my struggle and it is REAL). The best way to convey this is with visual merchandising that draws customers in and lets them enjoy what it can feel like to own it, if even for a few minutes. We need to figure out and deal with every excuse a homeowner might have for not using outdoor spaces. It’s trendy, I know they want it, they just aren’t doing it. Let’s figure out why.

Host an outdoor room clinic day. Hire a pro garden designer that specializes in outdoor rooms (or one that doesn’t, but is very good at pretending) to come in for the day and have people bring in photos of their spaces. The pro can suggest improvements that are totally site specific. You can also tailor your merchandising for your big outdoor room clinic day.

You can create a few jewel box rooms with arborvitaes on three sides, table, chairs and a rug in each set-up. Each with a different feel. Outdoor fans or heaters? Do it. Pet bowls? Necessary. Cell phone charging station? Yes. Keep a non-stop flowing jug of ice water for customers in this area? For sure. Shade sail over the top? Really, it’s for the best.

Remember that an outdoor room doesn't have to be a living room, it can be a kitchen, bathroom (shower or tub, skip the toilet maybe), bedroom or tiki bar. The important thing is to list out all the reasons that stop people from doing these obviously awesome things to their yards and use visual merchandising to thwart that thinking. Everybody deserves an outdoor room; we're just the people to make that happen.

P.S. Secretly, I'm very, very afraid that people just don't like being outdoors, but they like looking at pictures of outdoors settings. I mean, that would explain it. This can't be true though ... right? **GP**

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