

Outdoor Living Spaces

From [David Beaulieu](#),
Your Guide to [Landscaping](#).

Divide and Conquer: Creating Outdoor Living Spaces

Why stay cooped up inside when you can extend the livable portion of your property by creating outdoor living spaces? It certainly isn't difficult to build outdoor living spaces. But it does take an appreciation for the "divide and conquer" approach.

We take it for granted that our houses are divided into rooms, but the concept of having similar "outdoor living spaces" may sound odd, at first. Indeed, the biggest obstacle standing in most people's way is that it just doesn't occur to them to divide up a yard so as to maximize their enjoyment of it. Not consciously, at least. Yet the more conscious we become of outdoor living spaces, the more we can tailor them to suit our needs.

Outdoor Living Spaces: Design Considerations

Part of the beauty behind the concept of separate "rooms" in a house is that each unit is unique unto itself.

Consequently, you can install a component in the kitchen that looks great **there**, without worrying that it would look out of place if viewed from the bedroom. The same is true for outdoor living spaces.

Having separate outdoor living spaces allows you to create mini-landscape designs (each somewhat different from the rest) for each of them. Not that you shouldn't still strive for [unity](#) across your landscape design, as a whole. But the more successful you are in physically separating one outdoor living space from another, the more flexibility you have to diversify without creating a hodgepodge.

For instance, you may wish to include a storage bin for towels in the pool area. Such an element would be functional and would look fine **there**. But the problem is, you might not wish to view it from another part of the yard dedicated, say, to meditating in naturalistic surroundings. The answer: screen off the pool area with a tall hedge or fence, effectively creating a "room" separate from the rest of the yard.

Outdoor Living Spaces: Setting the Mood With Color

Just as you can paint or wallpaper an indoor room using a color scheme unique to that room, so you can use color to make individualized statements for each of your outdoor living spaces. But here, instead of paint or wallpaper, you determine your color scheme when you select the plants you'll be using for the area.

Proper application of color theory in landscape design can even influence mood and perception. For instance, the flower colors to employ for a relaxing nook intended for meditation would be different from the colors used for play areas. You can also make small spaces seem larger (and

vice versa) depending on the colors you use. I discuss these ideas further in my article on applying [color theory](#) to landscape design.

Outdoor Living Spaces: The "Building Blocks"

Think of the structural components of outdoor living spaces in terms of their counterparts in indoor rooms: floor, walls and ceiling. Only for outdoor living spaces, the term, "structural" is used metaphorically. So much the better for you, as the "builder," since it means there's a lot less to worry about. Taking out a "wall" because you don't like your initial choice won't cause the "ceiling" to come crashing down on your head!

Furthermore, think of the materials you need to assemble the floor, wall or ceiling of an outdoor living space as the "building blocks." Here are some examples:

For "floors":

- [Grass](#)
- An alternative ground cover, such as [clover](#)
- [Mulch](#)
- [Patios](#)
- [Decks](#)

For "walls":

- [Formal hedges](#)
- [Lattice screens](#)
- [Fences](#)
- [Informal hedges](#)

For "ceilings":

- [Arbors](#) and pergolas
- The canopies of [shade trees](#)
- Decorative canvas canopies
- awnings
- lawn umbrellas

You have a lot of leeway in your use of these building blocks. For example, the building blocks for a "wall" (hedges, fences, etc.) are interchangeable parts that you can mix and match with, depending on your needs, budget and personality. Hedges may form two of your four walls, fencing the other two. If complete screening isn't required, you can also define outdoor living spaces with lower vertical elements that may be more attractive/functional. For instance, [raised beds](#), container gardens and furniture. Creating outdoor living spaces isn't a one-size-fits-all project.

A "ceiling" is optional for many outdoor living spaces, although it does create an added sense of enclosure that you may crave. Ceilings are necessary only for areas where staying dry/cool is a must.

By default, all projected outdoor living spaces already have "floors." The only question will be, "Does the current floor do the best job of meeting my needs?" For example, maintenance is

always a consideration, and you may decide, upon further reflection, that a grassy area you've been treading upon for years isn't worth the upkeep (mowing).

Outdoor Living Spaces: Function

Many of your questions regarding which "building blocks" to use in assembling your outdoor living spaces will be answered if you determine the true function of the "room" in question. I'll take up that subject on [Page 2](#)....

Let Function be Your Guide

As stated on [Page 1](#), you need only look to the intended **function** of outdoor rooms to determine the "building blocks" needed to compose them. Keep both [aesthetics](#) and function in mind when constructing outdoor rooms. But in areas dedicated to physical activity, if you have to choose between the two, focus on function. Never compromise on safety. You can make up for compromises in aesthetics later, when you accessorize your outdoor rooms.

Below are examples of outdoor rooms and how to put them together.

Outdoor Rooms: Pool Areas

Let's begin with outdoor rooms whose main function is to house a swimming pool. [Landscaping around swimming pools](#) presents specific challenges regarding safety, maintenance and privacy.

You don't want people slipping on anything, you don't want to spend all your time cleaning up debris, and you don't want the neighbors peering in at you. In selecting a "wall" to enclose the area, all of these considerations come into play.

A strong argument can be made, then, for having a fence serve as the "wall" around a pool, rather than a hedge or a lattice screen. A tightly constructed fence will do the best job of screening out prying eyes. And because it has no leaves or needles to shed, there's nothing to slip on, nothing to clean up.

"Floors" in pool areas must be slip-resistant. "Ceilings" usually aren't necessary: you're going to get wet anyway, and sunbathing and swimming go hand-in-hand.

Outdoor Rooms: Meditation Areas

For meditation gardens, some of the concerns are the same, some different. Privacy is still very much an issue (since secluded settings are more relaxing than open settings), as is maintenance. But safety goes on a back burner. Here, reflection, not physical activity, takes center stage. Aesthetic considerations, consequently, will carry greater weight.

Most people find plants more relaxing than [hardscape](#), so consider planting hedges to form the walls of such outdoor rooms. If you don't want to wait for hedges to get tall enough to afford privacy, install lattice screens, instead. To satisfy your requirement for plants and provide further privacy, train [vine plants](#) to grow up the lattice. [Climbing hydrangeas](#) are perennial vines and an excellent choice for shady areas. You have more choices in the sun, including that ever-popular annual, the morning glory.

For a floor, consider a combination of natural materials. You want something interesting into which to gaze, something with distinct textures. For instance, a rustic [flagstone patio](#), with [scotch moss](#) planted in the cracks between the stones -- or [creeping thyme](#), if you enjoy landscaping with [fragrant plants](#).

In meditation gardens, a ceiling may come in quite handy. Here, you'll have to choose between aesthetics and functionality. A vine-covered arbor may be more inspiring to gaze up at than a lawn umbrella, but the latter will keep you -- and the books you may be reading -- dry. If you'd like something more solid than an umbrella, consider installing a [pergola](#) and covering it with fiberglass.

But water shouldn't be banned entirely from contemplative outdoor rooms. If there's any place in our yards for accessories such as [garden fountains](#) and [waterfalls](#), surely it's here! There's nothing like the soothing sound of bubbling water to put us into a reflective mood.

Outdoor Rooms: Play Areas

If you have kids who enjoy baseball, football, soccer, or just plain running around, set aside a special outdoor room just for them. You can't beat a grass floor for these activities. While a ceiling won't be necessary, walls are a must. You don't want errant tosses rolling into the street or wiping out those flowers you just planted in another portion of the yard. A solid fence will probably best serve the role of wall here, something that will easily stop a ball. Hedges are less effective, because balls either get through them or get lodged within them. By having to repeatedly dislodge balls stuck in a hedge, kids may end up wrecking the hedge.

For information on accessories for outdoor rooms, please see [Page 3](#)....

Maximize Functionality of Outdoor Spaces With Accessories

Given their individualized purpose, meditation gardens in particular are outdoor spaces that cry out for accessories. Curios and pieces of yard art can serve as [focal points](#) here. Any objects that have special meaning for you are potential accessories, as long as they can stand up to the elements.

More conventional [lawn ornaments](#) will generally be preferred as accessories in areas visible from the street when focal points are needed.

[Outdoor patio furniture](#) sets and similar accessories are utilized in many types of outdoor spaces, especially those designed for dining. For many people, the place for dining alfresco is either the patio or the deck.

Fortunately, a wide variety of [patio and deck accessories](#) are now available to enhance the experience of dining outdoors.

Why limit the time you spend in your outdoor spaces to the summertime? Even for Northern climes, accessories are available that can extend your enjoyment of the yard into other times of the year. Outdoor fireplaces, electric heaters and gas heaters are accessories that will keep you warm through late fall and allow you to resume your pursuits in early spring. Outdoor lighting is another great "extender," permitting you to enjoy your outdoor spaces under the stars.