



Alfresco living

ALL FIRED UP

Extend the use of your outdoor space during winter and experience the joys of an outdoor fireplace or fire pit

WORDS SUE WHEELER

As a nation, we are always looking for ways to enjoy our outdoor space and a fire pit delivers this in spades. It adds another dimension to your backyard, allows after-dark entertaining when it's cold and lends an ambience you just can't beat. "Fire pits are an increasingly popular feature in garden designs," says Henry Chapple-Cox, senior associate at Secret Gardens in Sydney. "They give people another great 'excuse' to be drawn outside away from the deck and experience their garden in a more immersive way." And the good news is, you don't need a big budget or a big garden. Hold the marshmallows as our experts set the scene for the perfect fire pit experience.

PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE) PRUE RUSCOE (OPPOSITE) MIGUEL FLORES-VIANNA

Outdoor fireplaces

Building a home or renovating? You might consider including an alfresco fireplace. "A proper, fixed fireplace becomes a feature you can enjoy year-round," says Toby France, director at Exterior Architecture in Sydney and the Sunshine Coast. "We'll mainly use masonry clad with stone, which we'll also feature somewhere else on the property to tie it in."

Light my fire The tranquil open-air living space (this page) in a US home designed by M Elle Design, with architecture by Forest Studio, boasts an outdoor fireplace as a focal point. The more compact entertaining area (opposite) by Imogen Naylor features the 'Tucson 80' fire pit from Milkcan. >



Planning your fire pit

Comply before you buy Before the good times roll, make sure you tick the boxes on any regulations. At state level, lighting an outdoor fire pit is generally legal without a permit, but you'll need to confirm this, along with any local council requirements, such as its distance from flammable materials and approved fuel types. If you live in an apartment, consult your strata association first.

A safe distance Fire pits with an open flame need to be a safe distance from your house and any flammable structures, including awnings, pergolas, overhanging tree branches or nearby utility lines. Depending on the environment, that's likely between three and five metres. Fire pits using gas or ethanol (even those not enclosed by glass) are usually safer to use closer to your home, near swimming pools and in some covered areas.

Ground rules Above-ground fire pits are best placed on gravel, pavers or a heat-resistant concrete base. Designs with stands or plinths are good options for protecting surfaces from direct heat. "We don't usually advise having it directly on grass as it can scorch and be a fire hazard," explains Henry.

FIRE PIT SAFETY TIPS

- 1 Before use, check for total fire bans and other restrictions with your local fire authorities.
- 2 Only burn 'seasoned' (dried) wood and avoid burning any rubbish.
- 3 Have access to a water source for extinguishing the fire and make sure all family members know how to do this.
- 4 Never leave your fire unattended or leave young children without supervision.
- 5 Ensure your fire pit is properly constructed and well-maintained.

Bright spark *Zoysia tenuifolia* planted between Eco Outdoor 'Garonne' pavers adds softness to a sleek outdoor hearth (this page) by Exterior Architecture. Strike a match A fire drum in Corten steel from Hibernate Outdoor's warms this hideaway (opposite) by Secret Gardens.

Designing your fire pit

To make the most of your garden's new entertaining zone, consider space, layout and the style of your fire pit

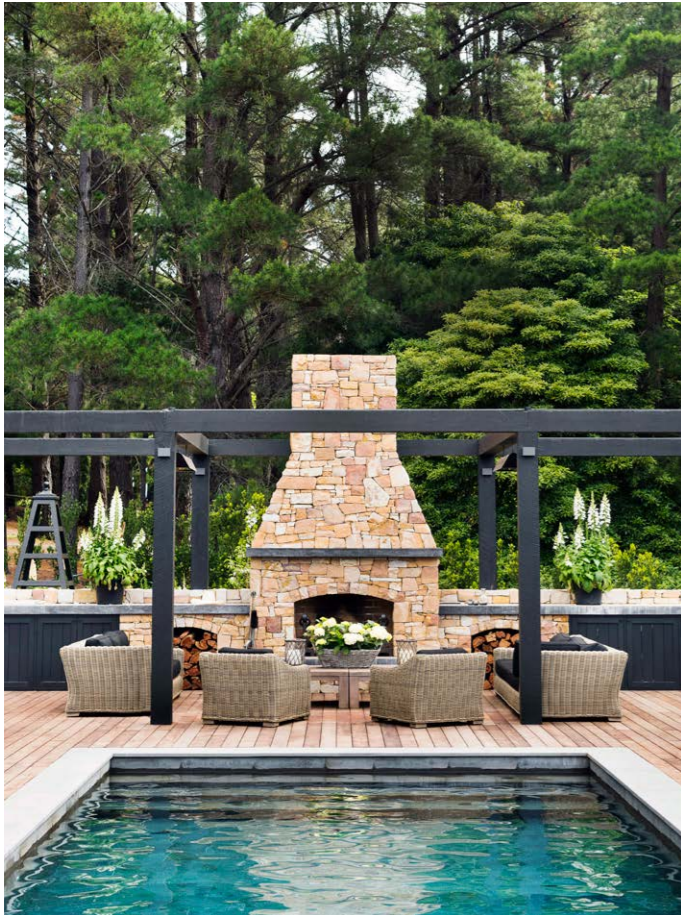
A sense of space "When choosing the location of your fire pit, remember it's about enticing people outdoors. You want to strike a balance: not too close to the house and not too far away that you barely use it," says Henry. "Before you pick a specific design, consider what's possible within your space, including its proportions and whether the scale of a fire pit and surrounding area will work within this." When it comes to the area around your fire pit, how do you want to use it and what's your seating plan? "Don't go crazy in a small area. A setting that's too compact feels as if you're sitting on top of the fire," adds Henry.

Portable or permanent? If you have plenty of space, a permanent set up works well. "This opens the door to in-ground designs and permanent seating in timber or sandstone, which looks beautiful and blends well with green surroundings and country settings," explains

landscape designer Snezana Bellotti of Snazzy Gardens. When alfresco space is tight, portable fire pits make sense, whether that's a bioethanol design, or a wood-burning fire pit. "We often suggest a flexible area: enjoy a fire pit during the winter, then move it during the summer and use the space for another activity. Alternatively, a design with a lid will turn it into a table or a grill plate to create a cooking zone," shares Toby of this smart, multi-tasking option.

Please be seated Corner seating is another space-saving option, allowing you to swap an outdoor table for a fire pit when the mood takes you. Remember, your fire pit seating doesn't have to be permanent; you could simply pull up chairs or stools when you need them. "However, comfort is important for encouraging people to spend time here," adds Henry. "Have cushions on hard seats and a backrest if the design allows." Cosy blankets can also set the mood. >

Find your style
Be choosy The shopping list of fire pits has grown along with their popularity and there's now something for every space, style and budget, from a \$100 black steel pit from Bunnings to elaborate designs that cost thousands.
Questions to ask Do you want your fire pit to be square or circular, in-built or portable, raised or near ground level? Are you after something simple and rustic that reminds you of childhood camping trips, a more sophisticated design, or even a permanent outdoor fireplace?
Complement your home "Aim to complement the style of your home and its surroundings," says Toby. "In terms of materials, sandstone looks great with a country or Hamptons home, or you might choose a concrete for a contemporary home with more architectural features."
Get connected "Fire pits look their best if they are 'grounded' in the space," advises Henry. "Connecting the design and the material to the garden in some way creates a sense of belonging. For a more immersive experience – and if you have enough lawn – you could cut into a garden bed and create an area around the fire pit with plants and gravel or pavers."



SHOPPING



'Stix 8' portable fire pit, \$2995, EcoSmart Fire.



'Firedrum', \$1909, Hibernate.



'Nova 600' ethanol fire pit, \$995, Milkcan.



'Tucson 80' fire pit in Rust, \$339, Milkcan.



EcoSmart Fire ethanol 'Base 30' fire pit, \$2845, Remarkable Outdoor Living.

PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE) MARTINA GEMMOLA (OPPOSITE) JENNA KENSEY

Eternal flame Clad in a ring of ironstone, a Jumbuck fire pit from Bunnings pairs perfectly with mountain gravel mix in a beautiful Blue Mountains home (this page). Cosy & cool An outdoor entertaining zone by landscape designer Paul Bangay celebrates the work of local stonemasons with the striking fireplace (opposite).

ADD FUEL TO THE FIRE

Wood fires burn dry, seasoned wood. While most of us love the atmosphere of a wood-burning fire, they do produce a lot of smoke (which has associated health risks). Charcoal, heat beads and briquettes are easier to light and create less smoke.
Gas fire pits use LPG or Natural Gas. Gas fire pits tend to be more expensive, and those at the luxury end can even be compatible with smart home apps. You won't get ash or embers, but they don't generate as much heat as wood fires. Some designs are suitable for balconies. Check with local councils for any regulations.
Ethanol is a clear, low-odour, colourless liquid. Fire pits with an in-built ethanol fuel reservoir offer similar benefits to gas fires, but are often more cost-effective. 'Bioethanol' is a renewable and sustainable fuel. **119**