

FIRE ESCAPE

BY KILEY JACQUES

IF YOUR OUTDOOR LIVING SPACE IS LACKING PIZZAZZ, CONSIDER GIVING IT A FLAME.

Hot Stuff
A custom outdoor fireplace in Peabody built by Comak Brothers Landscaping.

photograph by DOUG LEVY

THOUGH IT CAN WREAK HAVOC AND CAUSE LIFE-ALTERING CALAMITY, **FIRE** IS ALSO CAPABLE OF **TOUCHING US** IN A WAY THAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS **GENTLE**. IT IS CREDITED WITH **EASING** TROUBLED MINDS, **RELAXING** ANGST-FILLED SOULS, AND **UNITING** HEARTS TORN ASUNDER.

The history of fire is as colorful as its flames. The earliest known evidence of the controlled use of fire reveals that our ancestors may have harnessed it a million years ago to keep warm, stave off nighttime predators, and cook difficult-to-digest raw foods. It has been suggested that the social aspect of gathering around a campfire is what separates us from other species. In fact, according to researcher Michael Chazan, a Paleolithic archaeologist at the University of Toronto, “The control of fire would have been a major turning point in human evolution.”

One of the four basic natural elements,

fire has, indeed, proved vital to our existence. These days, for most of us, it is less a means of securing safety than an avenue to enjoyment—both indoors and out. Fireplaces and pits, pizza ovens, chimineas, and a host of artistic presentations in the form of torches, log candles, walls, bowls, troughs, rings, and tables are employed in all manner of interior and exterior settings.

An appreciation for the inclusion of fire features in the residential landscape can be seen in the boom of its popularity over the last five to eight years. A 2013 survey of top outdoor living trends conducted



Rock Artist
Barry Comak

by the American Society of Landscape Architects concludes that American homeowners are increasingly drawn to adding outdoor rooms for entertaining and recreation on their properties. It is a trend professional garden designers and landscape experts have followed carefully. The survey results also point to a demand for both sustainable and low-maintenance designs—hence, the fire pit’s popularity.

Jim Goddard of J and R Fine Landscaping (jandrfinelandscaping.com) says, “The [fire pit] trend started with the “staycation” idea. It gives people an entertainment option at home, away from video games and TV. It’s a place where the family can sit around together and talk like [we] used to as kid[s].” He appreciates the pit’s simplicity and believes it is on par with larger, more substantial fireplaces and ovens when it comes to effect. “Just put some rocks in a circle and throw in some wood,” he says. “It can be very simple [but] people will still enjoy it. It’s very basic.”

Barry Comak of Comak Brothers Landscaping (comakbros.com) has also seen an upsurge in the number of clients looking to add a fire element to their outdoor living areas. He, too, attributes the increase to the economy. “People stay home more and entertain,” says Comak, who has been in business on the North Shore for 35 years. “One of the best things about a fireplace, fire pit, or outdoor oven is that they can be used year round,” he says. “Clients are always telling me about having parties outside, toasting marshmallows, and [drinking] warm cider while it’s snowing out. One customer made seats out of shoveled snow so more people could be there. It was pretty cool.”

The benefits of capitalizing on the element’s appeal are many. An outdoor fire feature with year-round functionality extends New England’s outdoor season, as well as a home’s physical capacity for accommodating social gatherings. Whether it’s down time

with the family, intimate get-togethers with friends, or a full-blown party, having a fireplace, pit, oven, or the like adds another dimension to entertaining. Inevitably, it becomes the focal point, and as most who have spent time staring into a blaze will attest, it acts as a common denominator and elicits friendly conversation and warm feelings.

For at-home relaxation, much like a private sauna or Whirlpool, a fire feature offers a healthy means of de-stressing. As Goddard says, “If [I] come home from work and make a little fire in the backyard, it totally changes everything...it’s soothing.” Beyond the feel-good benefits, however, there can be a monetary value, which adds to a property’s selling points.

Comak affirms the enthusiasm spawned by fire elements. “I just show [clients] some pictures of jobs that we have done,” he says. “Usually, that’s all it takes.” His area of expertise is custom-built fireplaces, and he feels strongly that they should not be stand-alone features. “Make sure [a fire element] is part of an area,” he says, “and not just in the middle of the yard. It should have enough [space]



The Good Life
Comak Brothers’ custom-built fireplaces exemplify outdoor living. Below, field stone fireplaces are perfect for New England homes.



for people to sit around it and feel its warmth.” He also makes clear the importance of its utilitarian contribution to the landscape. “Not only does the structure have to look good,” he says, “[but it also] has to function correctly. You don’t want a smoke show.”

It’s easy to visualize some kind of fire feature in the backyard, but it’s a bit more difficult to choose the right one. There are some things to consider when researching the options. First, estimate both the financial cost and the predicted time spent enjoying it to see if it’s a worthy investment. (Note: It is a known fact among industry professionals that the closer the feature is to the house, the more it will be used.) Then, give some thought to long-term maintenance



Master Mason
Martin Pearson stokes a flame in Plainville.

requirements. Think about how it will relate to both the broader landscape and the home’s architecture. Decide whether it ought to be kit- or custom-made, stationary or portable. Know the type of fuel that’s to be used and the pros and cons of each (e.g. wood vs. artificial logs, natural vs. propane gas, or bio-fuels, lava rocks, glass stones, etc.). Determine site factors that will affect the feature’s success (e.g. wind exposure, visibility from inside the house, proximity to a water source, etc.); establish an appropriate style, materials, and finish. The list goes on, but the research is worth it.

Tony Hurley of Artistic Landscapes (artistic-landscapes.com) adds to the litany of things to bear in mind. He names competing landscape lighting, varying

views and access points, and how to best showcase the feature as all impacting its ultimate design. He agrees with Comak when he says, “The complete experience is often achieved through the creation

of comfortable seating around the fire. [Seating] should provide a good view of the fire element from different vantage points, including from inside the house and different areas around the fire.” He

CHOOSING THE RIGHT FIRE FEATURE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

1. Determine the usability of existing onsite materials
2. Incorporate the feature into the rest of the landscape; make sure it harmonizes with its environment
3. Make sure the feature complements the house architecture
4. Work with, not against, the property specifications (e.g. topography, wind and sun exposure, lot size, etc.)
5. Conduct a cost/benefit analysis
6. Choose between custom-made and kit-fabricated features

Photographs courtesy of Comak Brothers Landscaping

photograph by DOUG LEVY

favors fire pits that are at least 36 inches in diameter. “If the fire element is smaller, then the wood will need to be cut very small, and the fire will be less impactful.” He also recommends using mortar rated for high heat rather than the standard rating, as the former is less likely to dry out and crack. When designing a new feature, Hurley thinks carefully about its placement. “Depending on the location of the fire element,” he says, “I may suggest it be open-ended or circular in shape... [exposed] or covered.” He feels location should ultimately determine style, as location and style “complement the other elements already in [the] landscape...and can lead to many pleasant evenings over several years.”

Probably third in line of popular outdoor fire features, following the pit and fireplace, is the oven. To date, wood-fired pizza ovens, perfect for at-home entertainment, are the most common for landscape use. They are made just like those that are used in restaurants and look something like an igloo. They are often assembled from kits but, as with most things, custom-built elements are infinitely more attractive.

Martin Pearson, an area brick mason, has become an expert pizza oven builder. His work has been featured in *Edible Boston* magazine and has thrilled foodies from Plainville to Essex County and

beyond. He favors wood-fired soapstone heaters, concrete bases, foam blast insulation, and landscape timbers for propping. His smallest ovens are about 42 inches in diameter (24 inches inside) and they are built on site. “I can bring it to your backyard and you’ll be making pizza that night,” says Pearson. He recommends outdoor ovens to be built at least 15 feet from the house, but “not so far that you won’t want to venture out in unpredictable New England weather.” In fact, Pearson designs his ovens with our capricious climate always in mind. “They can be as simple as a clay dome with no chimney,” he says, “[or] a barrel-vaulted brick oven with a chimney and roof.” No matter the form, Pearson says, “The roof, to me, is the cat’s meow, because you can go out there in the rain and in the snow.”

From the simple fire pit to the most ornate fireplace to the increasingly popular outdoor ovens—they all seem to satisfy an innate human desire to watch, feel, and control a blaze. The lure is undeniable. A timeless, frightful, and, at times, sophisticated element—fire, when artistically harnessed and employed in the residential landscape, becomes a hearth. “The fire element,” says Comak, “is to the outside what the kitchen is to the inside...it draws people...it’s a gathering point.”

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Tewksbury Masonry & Landscaping Supply

1585 Shawsheen St., Tewksbury, 978-640-1007, [tewksburymasonry.com](https://www.tewksburymasonry.com)

Landscape Express

218 New Boston St., Woburn, 781-933-3818, [landscapeexpress.net](https://www.landscapeexpress.net)

Cavicchio Greenhouses, Inc. (wholesaler)

110 Codjer Ln. and 294 Lincoln Rd., Sudbury, 978-443-5440, [cavicchio.com](https://www.cavicchio.com)



Roof Use
Outdoor brick oven
by Martin Pearson