



# warm up to fire pits

This cozy outdoor gathering spot provides comfort and warmth throughout the year BY JOHN COWEN

Pairing fire and water is a dramatic juxtaposition. Here, the fire pit fits into the flagstone and fieldstone patio, and the ring wall doubles as a seat near the flames.



If you need a quick fix of fire for your terrace, you can purchase any of a number of models of freestanding fire bowls, fire pits or chimineas. Note: Do not place anything with an open flame on a covered porch.

Photo at left: Deidra Walpole; Photo at right: Scott Zimmerman

Outdoor fireplaces/fire pits extend the time during which you can enjoy sitting outside. In some parts of the country, relaxing outdoors by a roaring fire could become a year-round event. In colder climates, the fireplace can provide enough warmth and cheer to encourage homeowners to sit outside well beyond the normal limit, maybe even up to the first frost. It is important to keep in mind, however, that creating a well-used and attractive space for an outdoor fireplace/fire pit requires combining function with aesthetics. Before you begin, take some time and consider the following:

- The **location** should provide shelter from the elements, such as harsh winds, as much as possible. It also should be a quiet, intimate space, accessible without intruding upon other aspects of the landscape, such as vegetable gardens, a pond or an orchard. Generally, this means it should be close to the house for ease of access, although this is far from a prerequisite. Think of its location on your site. For instance, is the fireplace to be at the center of the space so that people can gather around it and it becomes the focal point? Or is there a setting that allows a view of a beautiful sunset? If the space isn't going to be used on a regular basis, then setting a freestanding outdoor fireplace/fire pit on your lawn could be all that's required.

• **the design** begins once you determine the location, and you have a number of choices to make. First, envision the style of fireplace/fire pit and the surrounding space that you desire. This will depend on a number of factors, including the style of the architecture of your house, and any outdoor decks or patios. Is there an element of the house's architecture—such as the shape of a prominent eyebrow window—that you can introduce into the shape of the new feature to provide a visual link with your home? Drainage is also key; you don't want to be setting your fireplace in a low-lying swampy or muddy area that has swarms of mosquitoes. For help in selecting your style, go online or look through books for ideas. One we like: *Fire Places*, published by The Taunton Press, ©2006.

• The **choice of materials** for the surrounds—paving and retaining walls—needs to be considered next. For instance, if the space is intended

to be a formal design, squared and cut paving slabs set in a formal manner could be the solution, along with a wall in a similar or compatible material. A less formal space could use a free-form shape for paving. Deliberate randomness in the stones' shape and a rustic-style retaining wall would enhance that setting.

• The **shape and form** of the fireplace should follow the style and form of the site, or vice-versa. Is it to be a square formal fireplace/fire pit that's set at the same grade as the paving, such as a gas-fired pit that requires only pressing a button and presto you have fire? A simpler solution might be a freestanding fireplace sitting on top of the sitting space that you feed with logs. A fireplace or fire pit can be any size, but dimensions average between 2½' in diameter or 4' square. There should be enough space around the fireplace to allow the sitters to have at least 4' between them and the fireplace. A safety aspect to remember is not to locate an outdoor fireplace beneath low



Photo: Mark Samu

The optimum spot for a permanent campfire, above, is well away from the house and surrounded by a gravel or stone patio. Ringing it with benches will make it a destination on a balmy evening.

This bottle-shaped fireplace, left, is an outgrowth of the terrace wall. Because it faces the stone terrace, there is no need for a distinct hearth extension, which means that you can get even closer to the flames.



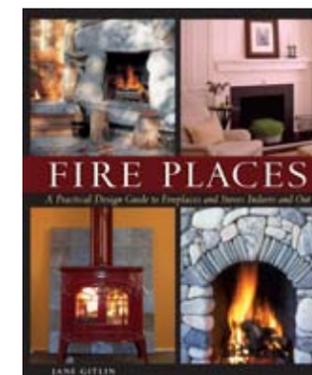
Photo above: J.K. Lawrence/www.jklawrencephoto.com

overhanging tree branches, or if you want to do this, prune the low branches before starting the fire to avoid starting a bigger one.

• The **planting of areas** adjacent to the fireplace area will enhance its overall feeling. First, consider how to make the space private/comfortable and block strong winds using trees or hedging. Whether plants are to be placed in a more formal manner or loose and free-form should be in keeping with the intended design of the space. The more ornamental, smaller plants are key to the night experience. In addition, you can include night-flowering plants that provide a fragrance that fills the air with an intoxicating perfume. The use of white flowers in a space for evening/night usage is a good trick, since the color white will show up better in the dark than some other colors might.

• **Night lighting** is an important consideration for an outdoor fireplace/fire pit space for both safety and aesthetic reasons. The safety considerations are of primary importance, since walking to your fireplace from the house in the dark can be dangerous. A few well-placed, beautifully designed lighting fixtures will get you and your guests to and from the house safely. More outdoor lighting can be used to either uplight or downlight or graze a specimen tree that's close or integral to the fireplace/fire pit's space. This adds another level to the overall experience.

Best of all, outdoor fireplaces are fun! They appeal to our prehistoric roots and let us all play caveman or woman. They act as a focal point and a gathering place. For many, they remind us of pleasant childhood evenings with family or at camp, bringing back memories of someone asking, "More s'mores?" Of course!



All photography courtesy of *Fire Places: A Practical Design Guide to Fireplaces and Stoves Indoors and Out* by Jane Gitlin, ©2006 The Taunton Press. Available at [www.taunton.com](http://www.taunton.com) and other online booksellers.