

AQUA

Aqua Magazine | March 2008 | Page 1 of 4

Fashionable Skirts

Today's outdoor living is a dance of color and texture. Wearing the right skirt, a spa can fit right in.

Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. Be that as it may, over the years most beholders of portable spas have found little to delight the eye — especially with the cover down. With the mesmerizing water hidden from sight, the eye is drawn to the skirts or surrounds, which have tended to be somewhat dull, even before the ravages of elements and various human and animal degradations rendered them positively ugly.

But nobody's giving up on the idea of both durable and beautiful portable spa skirts. In fact, manufacturers have considered well what defines grace in a portable spa side panel, and new ideas are reaching the market, with an emphasis on new, natural textures, flexibility and customization.

New thinking places the portable spa in its physical context and works to integrate it. The outdoor living area is an important movement in North American homes, and designers are starting to conclude that while it may be difficult to make a portable spa that can belt out a virtuoso solo, it can blend harmoniously into a sweet backyard chorus.

The Greater Outdoors

The spa market comprises a spectrum of consumers, but distinct among them are those building outdoor living space. The notion of a place under the sky where people can prepare food, eat, drink, relax and congregate has captured the homeowner's fancy, says Vic Walker, designer, Dimension One Spas, Vista, Calif.

"It's the most sought-after item for new homeowners — that nice outdoor kitchen or outdoor living space. And for people that already own homes, it's a great way for them to enlarge their community areas without having to do an add-on. If they can just put nice patio furniture and a fire pit in areas where they can entertain, they are adding a lot of value to their home without adding a lot of construction costs."

With homeowners enchanted with backyard living, manufacturers are focused just as intently on that space as a potential emplacement for a portable spa.

"I'm seeing huge trends in manufacturers understanding this lifestyle," Walker says. "Understanding that if we're going to sell to people that have a nice deck and an outdoor kitchen by their pool where they're meant to gather, then the spa that is in visual range of that area has to be on that same aesthetic level. So aesthetics are becoming a lot more important as our products are integrated into these outdoor living spaces."

Integration is the operative word here. Nobody's attempting to make a portable spa that is the jewel in the crown of an opulent backyard oasis. They just don't want the tub to make the whole thing look like a five-and-dime tiara.



AQUA

Aqua Magazine | March 2008 | Page 2 of 4

“If a consumer has this backyard they’ve spent all this money on,” says Walker, “and they have friends over, there’s a big difference between, ‘Wow, this looks like it was all designed to work together,’ and, ‘This looks like it was shotgunned together from a bunch of different sources.’”

Dress For Success

The question, then, is how to dress up a portable spa so it doesn’t look like the patio furniture’s poor stepchild.

Watkins Manufacturing has an interesting answer — let the backyard artist create the spa panels with the same brushstrokes used to paint the rest of the scene. Like a homebuilder leaving walls unfinished for the designer to adorn with wallpaper or paint, Watkins offers a spa with an exterior-grade plywood surround capable of accepting attachment of customized panels. The skirt can share the materials used in building the backyard oasis, or can simply complement them. “Consumers can make it look like whatever they want it to look like,” says Susan Strible, Hot Springs brand manager, Watkins Manufacturing, Vista, Calif.

The spa comes to the consumer with plywood on the side, and the consumer then works with a contractor to create panels. “They can make these panels out of whatever they want,” says Strible. “Whatever materials coordinate with their surroundings, whether it be faux brick or slate or tile, they can adhere to the panel and attach to the spa. The possibilities are endless.

“There are all kinds of custom materials out there. For example, there’s a company that makes custom doors for homes with a metallic surface; they could potentially make panels that would fit on the side of the spa that have a metallic look, with various patterns. One pattern I’ve seen looks like bamboo.”

The customer-designed spa surround is part of Watkins’ emphasis on making portable spas more attractive by allowing greater freedom for homeowners to author their basic appearance and use as an overall design element.

To that end, Watkins has published a guide to help homeowners, or landscapers and architects working with them, to integrate their portable spas into their backyard surroundings. The guide also encourages more artful construction options such as fully and partially recessed spas.

Recessed spas have a sleek inviting look and solve the problem of plastic skirts by hiding them underground. Watkins’ SpaStone Partial Surround looks built-in, with the imitation stone surround extending 23 inches below the spa bar top to a step that extends the length of the spa. The bottom of the surround meets up with a deck or other surface to complete the built-in appearance.

“We recognize that a lot of consumers may be opting out of purchasing portable spas because of the way they look,” says Strible. “In the past they’ve not been easy to integrate into their backyard design so some consumers have opted for a built-in cement or gunite spa.

“The thing is, there are so many benefits that a portable spa offers that an in-ground spa simply cannot. We really do feel like you’re getting the best of both worlds with this — you’re getting all the benefits and features of a portable spa and all the design and style of an in-ground spa.”

AQUA

Aqua Magazine | March 2008 | Page 3 of 4

Design Element

The concept of integration has invoked a different approach to surrounds at Dimension One, where outdoor scenes from great American open spaces, such as mountains and deserts, meld thematically with outdoor living. Here again, a subtle, complementary piece was the goal.

“With outdoor kitchens and outdoor living spaces becoming so popular,” says Walker, “our idea was to bring a two-tone element and skirt to accent the backyard living space instead of using fake wood, which is what most spas use.”

Retaining the durable HDPE plastic that can stand up to years of weather and abuse, Dimension One came up with a CNC manufacturing process to produce a two-tone, textured look by milling off an outer colored layer to reveal the base color beneath.

“Using this process, we’re able to make any image we want,” says Walker. “The first image was called ‘cattails’ and we have another one coming out called ‘palms.’ It’s a desert scene with cactuses, and then we’ll do a mountain one. We’re trying to hit all the major geographical areas in the U.S. where our spas are sold. These are organic designs that add texture, color and depth and help the spa become more of an architectural element, while retaining the essential durability of good spa trim.”

Fully committed to the flexibility movement in surrounds, Dimension One has designed its spas to allow consumers to swap out the side panels if they wish. So for instance, if a customer remodels or wants to go another thematic direction, the panels can be replaced, giving the spa a new look.

“Everyone is always investing money in their homes and changing their lifestyle,” adds Walker, “so we thought this would be a natural to make the spa able to make the change, too.”

Flattering Suggestion

Speaking of change, those paying close attention to spa surrounds at the recent industry shows in Las Vegas, Orlando or Atlantic City would have noticed changes in the look and feel of imitation stone surrounds. These stone surrounds are growing in popularity because they are more at home in the outdoor oasis atmosphere many homeowners are trying to construct.

Some offerings attempt to mimic the natural pattern of stone as closely as possible, while others offer some intentional distance between the faux and the real, relying on the suggestion of stone to achieve the desired integration.

“When you’re doing this kind of thing in the backyard, it’s more of a color and texture study,” says Walker. “We’re not going to fool anybody; they’re not going to look at that and say, ‘Oh look, it’s got a real rock skirt!’”

“So we didn’t try to make it like a real rock pattern. The designs we did were neutral, like our generic marble pattern, that has six different colors in it, so it works with a lot of different backyard compositions.”

Dimension One chose to leave the spa corners skirtless, unlike Sundance Spas, Chino, Calif., which wraps the stone all the way around the unit. Sundance has come to market with TerraStone, a stacked-stone look with coordinating steps. It’s a neutral color that blends in nicely with earth tones, particularly if there is stonework on the premises.

“Anticipating the aesthetic needs of sophisticated consumers,” says Ian Scali, design manager, “we developed the pattern

AQUA

Aqua Magazine | March 2008 | Page 4 of 4

and colorations of Terra Stone with harmonization in mind.”

Rocky II

Another approach to stone skirts is to try to make the spa appear to be the work of an actual mason. This is the direction of Replications Unlimited, St. Louis. The company provides surrounds to OEMs and retail stores and sells a surround kit direct to consumers.

The company has been using liquid materials to create artificial rock features for more than 20 years for customers such as Disney, Universal Studios and SeaWorld. For spa manufacturers and customers looking for surrounds that can impersonate rock, Replications Unlimited’s product is an obvious choice.

“It’s been a progression into something that could be used by a spa manufacturer,” says Jeff Jarboe, vice president. “We looked to the spa people with some of these stone wraps because that was a growing industry in the outdoor market industry. People were looking for a stone texture, especially on the upper-end stuff, and there was no inexpensive and simple way of doing it.”

Jarboe says the product has the same dimensional look, the same touch and feel, as rock. “Ours is a urethane polymer, it’s not a foam. It’s a material like your car bumper, so it’s extremely impact- and damage-resistant, and yet it’s flexible enough to bend around a corner. It feels and looks like real stone because it’s molded off a real stone; it’s all handpainted to blend in nicely.”

That’s the ultimate spa skirt aspiration in a nutshell — to blend in nicely. Spa surrounds have long been the butt of deprecating comments in the industry for their lack of imaginative design and just plain ugliness.

However, with the attention of major manufacturers focused on those exterior plastic walls, there’s good reason to think that one day spa surrounds will become a positive selling point.

Walker sees it coming. “I think surrounds are going to make a big comeback,” he says, “as soon as designers start understanding these new materials better and start designing for the plastic.”