

 **Patio furniture** 

Experts give tips for finding pieces that last

BY HELEN CAREFOOT

Special to The Washington Post

After a pandemic winter, Americans are ready to get outside. “We’re seeing tremendous growth and demand for outdoor furniture earlier in the year,” said Ron Hilton, chief merchandising and operations officer at Overstock. Traditionally, the company gets a spike in demand “in the late spring and early summer, but we saw that happen 45 days sooner this year,” he said.

If you’re thinking about buying new outdoor furniture, it’s time to move. The production delays of the past year are still a reality, said Tracy Morris, founder of Tracy Morris Design in McLean, Virginia. You might have to wait double the usual time to receive your items. But if you choose the right type of furniture — and treat it well — you won’t have to shop again for a long time.

Finding the right match

The main culprit of wear and tear, experts say, is exposure to the elements. Water can seep into wood and fabrics and cause mold. Wind can blow furniture around and damage it (or your house or deck), and sun can alter its color.

Marnie Oursler, president of Marnie Custom Homes, builds custom beach houses in Delaware, and she recommends taking stock of the environment the furniture will be in before making any purchases. Porous materials, such as wood, aren’t the best choice for spots that see a lot of humidity or rain, and painted pieces won’t last in sunny locations, where the paint can peel or crack. More delicate pieces made of raffia or wicker are better suited for a protected space, such as a screened-in or covered porch.

The best protection is an appropriately sized cover — or, if possible, bring your furniture inside if it goes unused for a long period of time.

Materials

Wood: Wood generally requires more maintenance than other materials, because periodic treatment is necessary to maintain its color and finish. However, it can last a long time if properly cared for. Many outdoor wood products come treated with sealant; check how often it needs to be treated.

“I wouldn’t do anything but teak. . . . Teak is really your main outdoor wood,” Morris said. Teak requires regular oiling to maintain its caramel color or it will weather to gray. Oursler loves that weathered look for the beach, but warns that buyers who don’t perform the required treatment could be disappointed.

A set of aged teak furniture is a major investment that will last “forever” with proper care, Morris said. Teak is graded from A to C based on the wood’s age and qual-



John Cole

A terrace designed by Anthony Wilder Design/Build has furniture by Brown Jordan and drapes from Perennials.



LEFT: For outdoor rugs, Marnie Oursler recommends Dash & Albert, including the watermelon striped handmade flatweave indoor/outdoor area rug (from \$54). RIGHT: Allen + Roth’s Truxton Stackable White Metal Frame Stationary Dining Chairs with Blue Sling Seat (\$39.98 at Lowe’s).



Wayfair, Lowe’s

ity; A-grade woods come from the heart of the tree and have a closer grain, more protective oil and richer color and will be much pricier and more durable than C-grade, which comes from the tree’s younger, outer part. Inquire about the wood’s grade when buying.

Acacia and eucalyptus are more budget-friendly hardwoods that work well outdoors, said Amy Wall, co-founder of custom furniture company BuilderChicks. (She suggests treating both yearly with a water-based sealer for maximum longevity.)

Eucalyptus is naturally resistant to moisture and pests but doesn’t handle extreme cold well because of its high moisture content. Wall said well-cared-for acacia pieces could last for 10 years, and eucalyptus for 20.

Cedar is another strong option, but Wall warns that it’s softer than teak, acacia and eucalyptus, so it’s easy to scratch or dent.

Oursler and Keira St. Claire, lead interior designer at Anthony Wilder Design/Build, don’t recommend pine pieces, which are usually less expensive and pressure-treated, unless the furniture is in a covered area, because pine is prone to splintering. Customers

after a wood look without the cost or maintenance should look into wood-grain furniture made of plastic composite, Morris and St. Claire said, which requires little care.

Metals: Metal furniture is popular and comes in numerous options, from inexpensive and lightweight aluminum to sturdier and more expensive stainless steel or wrought iron.

“Most of your inexpensive outdoor furniture is going to be made of aluminum, which won’t last as long,” St. Claire said. Aluminum is hollow, so it’s lightweight and easy to move — though that also means it could be more easily thrown by heavy winds. Oursler uses stainless steel by the beach, because it’s most resistant to rust. Wrought iron is extremely durable and heavy.

Metals generally don’t require regular care, but they can rust over time if they aren’t kept dry and covered. For durability, look for powder-coated finishes; the color and finish have been repeatedly sprayed and baked during production, so the surface won’t chip or fade.

Plastic: Plastic furniture doesn’t have to be unattractive and

cheaply made. High-density polyethylene plastic is sturdy and easy to clean and comes in numerous colors and finishes that can convincingly mimic other more expensive or finicky materials, such as raffia, wicker or wood, and it won’t fade in the sun like paint. Morris likes the Lollygagger lounge chair (\$595) from Loll Designs and Room & Board’s Emmet lounge chair (\$449), which are made out of recycled materials; Oursler likes the selection of composite Adirondack chairs at Lowe’s, including the Seaport classic white plastic frame stationary Adirondack chair (\$153.17) by Trex.

Fabrics: Fabrics add comfort and offer endless customization options, but they won’t last unless they’re made for outdoor use. “If you don’t invest in cushions, you’re replacing them every year, or every time it rains you’re running out trying to cover your furniture,” Morris said. Look for cushions made of reticulated foam, which wicks away moisture instead of absorbing it. PVC mesh, marine-grade vinyl or solution-dyed acrylic covers are durable options that are protected from moisture and UV damage.

Outdoor rugs should be made of solution-dyed acrylics or plastic fibers to wash easily and avoid mold. Morris likes Sutherland’s Perennials collection, which is sold at Restoration Hardware and Williams Sonoma; Oursler and St. Claire like fabrics from Sunbrella, which can be found at stores such as Ballard Designs, Crate and Barrel and Pottery Barn. For outdoor rugs, Oursler recommends Dash & Albert, including the watermelon striped handmade flatweave indoor/outdoor area rug (from \$54).

Brands and shopping

If your priority is durability, buy the best-quality pieces you can afford. Avoid oversized pieces, and look for classic shapes in simple colors, such as white, mushroom, navy or red, for an elegant and finished look that ages well.

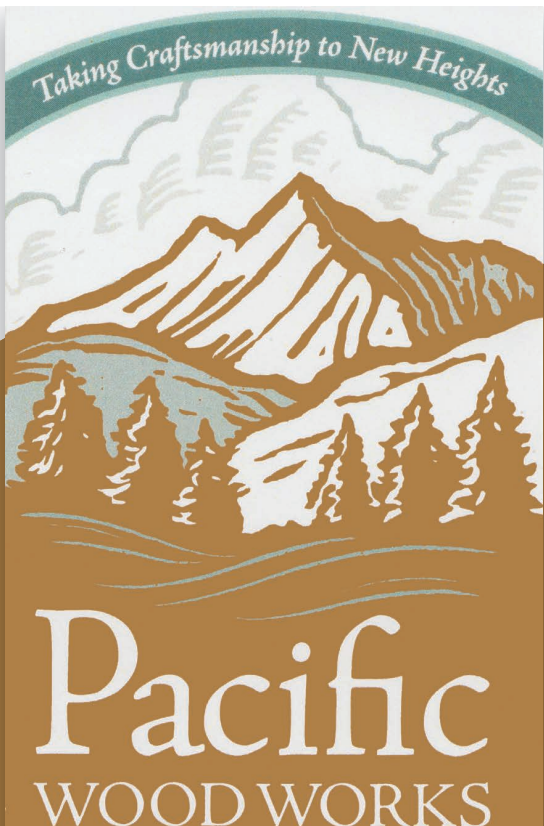
But not every outdoor element has to cost a lot. “Invest in the frame of the space, the pieces you’re sitting in, and have fun with accessories that you can change out,” St. Claire said. She and Morris suggest using plants and pots to inexpensively liven up a space.

For outdoor brands with quality materials, the experts we spoke with suggested Sutherland (available at Restoration Hardware), Gloster (available at patio.com and Design Within Reach), Brown Jordan (available at Home Depot and Patios USA) and Summer Classics (available at its website, summerclassichome.com).

For midrange options that are still fairly durable, Morris recommended Ballard Designs, West Elm and Room & Board.

For less-expensive options, Oursler likes Wayfair for its variety but cautions shoppers to keep scale in mind when shopping online and says to pick up pieces at the same time to avoid issues such as finding matches later on. She also likes Target for lightweight pieces that can be moved easily. And one of her favorite brands for outdoor dining sets, Allen and Roth, is sold at Lowe’s and has been a fixture in her beachside projects for years.

Price isn’t the only determinant of quality, but it often corresponds with craftsmanship. “A lot of [the price] is going to be in how it’s constructed, and if it’s lighter, it’s typically less expensive, and heavier products will be more expensive, because they’re substantial,” Oursler said. Read the product details about construction and care when shopping. Try out the furniture, and look at how the pieces, joints and screws are attached if you’re shopping in person. “Check if it’s screwed together or cast, and if you sit in it, does it wiggle and look like it’ll fall apart?” St. Claire said. “Something that folds and unfolds too many times also might get a lot of wear at the joints, so that’s something to think about.”



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