

Miami Herald

SOUTH FLORIDA

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Miami Herald
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SPECIAL REAL ESTATE SECTION • WK3518

Outdoor entertaining: an important part of South Florida lifestyle

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Special to South Florida Home

When South Floridians search for a home to buy, they often dream about entertaining outdoors. What makes a home good for hosting outdoor parties? And how can a host plan a successful alfresco event?

"Outdoor entertaining spaces are extremely important to people," said Peggy Marker of Marker Construction in Fort Lauderdale. "They're choosing to do more to the outside of their homes than the inside. We're seeing a strong need for large outdoors spaces across the board, in both single-family and multi-family homes."

In condominiums, clubhouses with kitchens are important, Marker said. "And in some multifamily buildings, they're using rooftops for their entertainment spaces."

AN OUTDOOR FOCUS

Realtors are taking notice of the outdoor focus. "Twenty years ago, the primary photo for every residential listing was the front of the house," said Danny Hertzberg, a Realtor with The Jills at Coldwell Banker in Miami Beach. "Now the primary image is the back of the house. The flow from inside to outside is important, and home staging isn't done just on the inside anymore, but on the outside too."

FEATURES

If outdoor entertaining is important, what features should a buyer look for?

Kitchens that open to the patio make transporting food and utensils easier. "Pass-throughs from the kitchen to the outside are popular," Hertzberg said.

Does the patio get morning or afternoon sun? If it faces west, guests



Furniture that can be moved around and reconfigured can make outdoor entertaining easier. (Courtesy of The Jills at Coldwell Banker)

may swelter at afternoon barbecues in the summer. Is there a covered space in case of rain? Can the grill be placed far enough away from the eating area so smoke won't blow in guests' faces during dinner?

In a single-family home: Is the compressor for the air-conditioner or the pool pump in the backyard? "The noise can take away from the beauty of outdoor entertaining," Hertzberg said. "It's better on the side of the house."

In a condo: "Think about how deep the balcony is," Hertzberg said. "Will you be able to fit a dining table and chairs there?"

Glass panels that slide in opposite directions like inside pocket doors, with no step-down to the patio, are becoming a popular feature in the luxury market. The design completely integrates the indoors and outdoors. "It creates a special dynamic," Hertzberg said.

HOSTING A PARTY

When it's time to host an outdoor party (think

now), there are ways to make it easier and more fun, as well as more environmentally friendly.

Is it time to buy some new outdoor furnishings? With summer more than half over in most of the country, they are likely to be on sale. Focus on pieces that serve both form and function, said Anna Noriega, owner of Aloré Events, a catering firm in Miami. "Consider a sectional that can be separated into pieces or placed together, and tables that are small but can become larger," she said.

CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENT

Avoid paper plates and napkins and single-use plastic drinkware and utensils that can quickly get expensive and ultimately end up in a landfill. Instead, invest in permanent outdoor tableware from somewhere like Target, Walmart or Home Goods that can be put into the dishwasher. "There are high quality melamine pieces in vibrant

colors," said Robert Egert, owner of Exquisite Catering by Robert in North Miami Beach. Inexpensive cloth napkins, place mats and tablecloths that can be tossed into the laundry will give the party a more formal look, save money in the long run over paper or plastic and be better for the environment.

DRESS THE TABLE

Dressing up the table in other ways can fun and a good way to impress guests. "Pick up some flowering plants," Egert said. "Use them in your tablescape, and when you're done you can plant them in the garden." Another tip: Pick up some small copper or silver pots at a home store to hold forks, knives and spoons on the buffet table, Egert said.

MAKE IT EASY

Try to craft the party so that the host (you) won't have to rush around from area to area taking care of guests.

In a larger yard, try to create a flow so guests mingle among seating groups, the bar and buffet, Noriega said. "You want your guests to engage with each other."

But don't make guests hunt for their dinners. "Put all the food together," Egert said.

"Keep the food away from water elements like the pool," Noriega said. "It can get into the food, or guests can slip." For a daytime party, put food in the shade under an umbrella or canopy, she added.

PLANNING THE MENU

When planning the menu, think about any special dietary considerations your guests may require. "There seem to be more of them recently," Egert said.

Is someone a vegetarian? Vegan? Won't eat pork but will eat beef, or vice versa? Can't touch sugar? Gluten intolerant? Hates greens and vegetables? Have at least one or two items the person can or is willing to eat. And, of course, if a guest has a true, life-threatening food allergy, eliminate it from the menu.

If the party is a breakfast or lunch, keep fare light, Noriega said. "Serve something that's not going to melt in the sun and will

your guests are likely to actually eat," he said.

Save some jobs for the last minute. "Don't put out food until you're ready to eat," Egert said.

HYDRATE, HYDRATE

Keep guests hydrated. "Have lots of cold beverages, whether they're alcoholic or not," Egert said. Lemonade, iced tea and lots of plain old ice water can keep summer thirst at bay.

"Freeze ice cubes, or molds in unique shapes, with elements like strawberries and cucumbers in them," Noriega said. "It's very trendy."

When alcoholic beverages will be part of the festivities, mixing individual cocktails can be time-consuming. Instead: "Create a signature cocktail you can serve in a carafe or punch bowl," Noriega said.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

A smart host keeps things simple enough so he or she doesn't experience more stress than fun. If it's a major event and the host won't enjoy attending to all the details, it may be a good idea to explore catering services. "Sometimes, people bite off more than they can chew," Egert said. "If you hire a professional, you can sit back and enjoy."



Glass panels that slide in opposite directions so indoor and outdoor spaces are completely integrated are becoming popular with buyers who enjoy outdoor entertaining. (Courtesy of The Jills at Coldwell Banker)



Hosts should serve foods that won't wilt at an outdoor party. (Courtesy of Aloré Events)



A centerpiece with fresh flowers can make an outdoor table beautiful. (Courtesy of Exquisite Catering by Robert)