

Deck Fires

Consider a chiminea to lend
ambience and style to your patio

DECK & PORCH | BY VINCENT RHODES

You wait all summer for the temperature and humidity to drop just enough to enjoy your patio or deck again. But sometimes fall brings evenings that are too chilly. Or maybe you aren't satisfied with the ambience your patio provides.

The answer to your problems could be a chiminea—an outdoor fireplace made from fired clay. They originated in Mexico and were used in the 17th century as wood-burning bread ovens. And now they're cropping up in homes all across the country.

Hal Wardell of Great Atlantic in Virginia Beach says his company began carrying chimineas about a year ago in response to increasing customer inquiries. They can also be found in the patio section of discount retail stores or at your favorite nursery or garden center. You can also purchase chimineas year-round at many fireplace stores or via the Internet.

Expect to pay anywhere from \$100 to \$260 depending on the size and quality of the chiminea. These outdoor fireplaces come in an array of styles and colors and range in size from 29 to 44 inches. A variety of accessories are available: covers, caps, screens and, in case it's not included with the chiminea itself, stands. The choice of model and accessories really depends on the space you have available and your decorative preferences.

"This is not a difficult purchase," Wardell explains. "It's not like you have to do a lot of research. It's just a matter of if you like that chiminea. They're all pretty much coming from the same place."

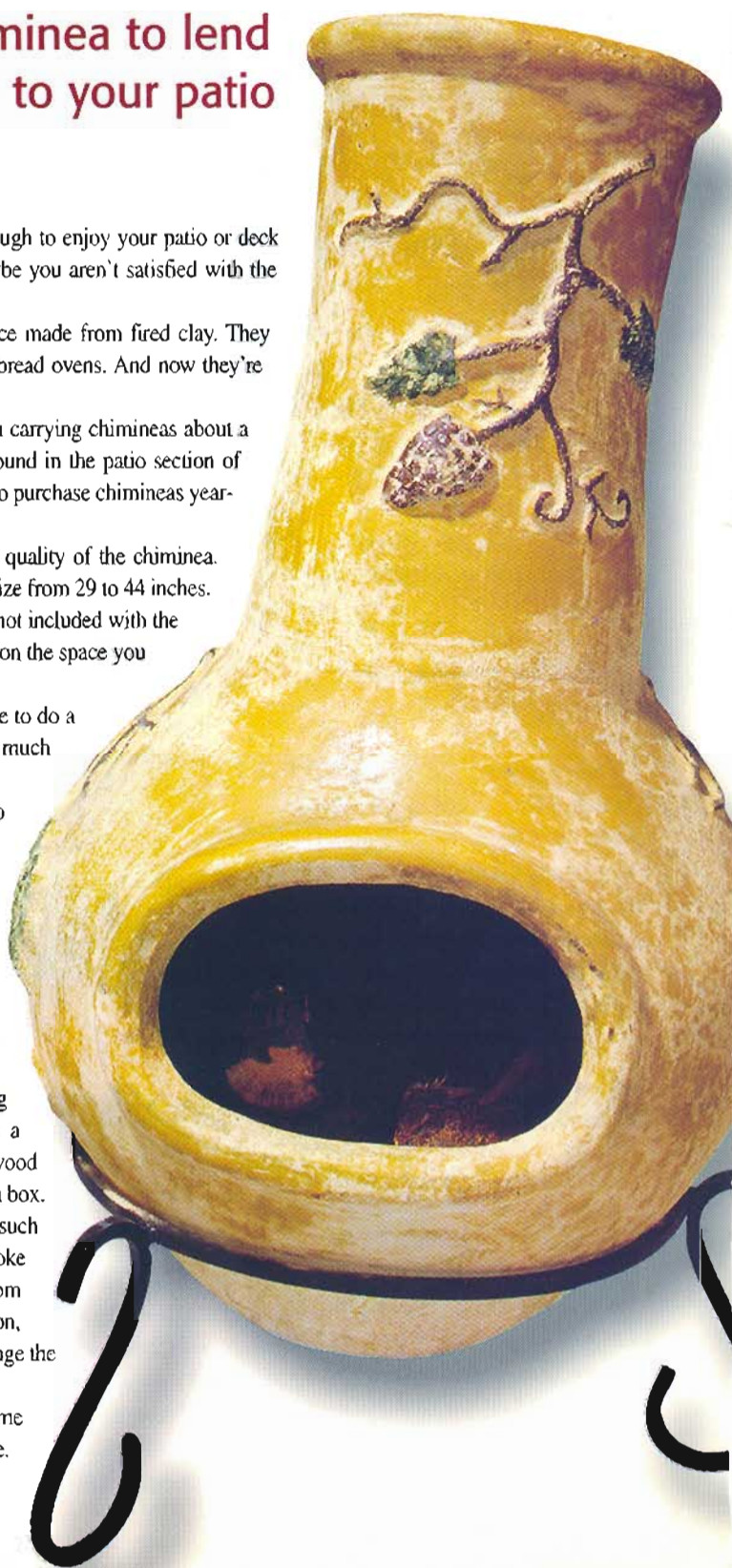
Ray Johnson of Virginia Beach-based Ray Johnson's Fireplace & Patio does caution customers to examine the quality of the product they choose. Most chimineas are hand made and, therefore, variation is the rule not the exception. According to Johnson, who has been selling chimineas in his store for about three years, some models can look "pretty rough."

Although these outdoor fireplaces are designed primarily for wood burning, at least one Internet vendor sells models fitted for natural gas or propane use. And Johnson says he occasionally uses his chiminea to burn small quantities of leaves and pine cones.

Pinon wood is the fuel of choice for use in chimineas. In addition to burning at a temperature less likely to damage the fireplace, the wood produces a pleasant aroma that wards off mosquitoes and other insects. This specialty wood is often available wherever chimineas are sold. Johnson sells pinon for \$20 a box.

You can also opt for cedar if you want an aromatic burn. And hard woods such as oak, birch and maple are an excellent option because they produce less smoke than pine. But if you don't have access to firewood or simply don't have room for a woodpile, you can also use commercial firelogs. If you choose this option, start by burning only half a firelog at a time. This will allow you to better gauge the intensity of the fire.

The key to successful use of a chiminea is to build small fires. In fact, some vendors recommend using only five to six pieces of pinon wood at a time. Even if you purchase one of the larger models, think small in terms of fire.



"They are mainly for atmosphere," Johnson says. "They will put out some heat, but you have to be pretty close."

Wardell adds that this is just one of the limitations of having a fire in a non-enclosed space. The heat dissipates quickly the farther away you move from the chiminea.

In the case of the fire you build, bigger just isn't better. Not only is it virtually impossible to heat a large area with a chiminea, it can be dangerous.

Dean Spik, a Norfolk resident, echoes this warning. "You have to be really careful. I accidentally built too big of a fire and flames shot out of the top."

Obviously, placement of the chiminea is an important consideration. If your intended location is a wooden deck, be sure to purchase a fire mat and consider using screens. Also be sure to avoid placing the fireplace too close to your home or dry patches on your lawn. Heat could potentially melt vinyl siding and stray sparks can quickly start unintended fires.

In terms of preventing damage to your chiminea, you should always keep a base of sand about four inches deep in the bottom of the fireplace. This protects the chiminea from intense heat. Remember: you should never use a chemical starter fluid since it can be absorbed into the clay.

Treat the outside of your chiminea once a year to protect it from excess moisture. Thompson's water sealer, available at most hardware stores, works well. And one vendor advocates applying an acrylic floor wax periodically to the exterior to retain that "like new" sheen.

But don't worry if the colors of your chiminea begin to change over time. That's the natural reaction of the clay to the fires you build. Hairline marks are also a typical result of the firing process and do not necessarily indicate a defect in your fireplace. Cold temperatures and excessive absorption of moisture, however, can lead to damaging cracks. For this reason, you should consider covering your chiminea or moving it indoors for the winter.

If you do decide to bring the fireplace in, be sure to take advantage of the decorating possibilities. A few candles placed inside the chiminea add a cheerful evening glow to any room. You can also place a potted plant (a trailing ivy or fern might work best) inside the fireplace for a botanical accent. **HR**

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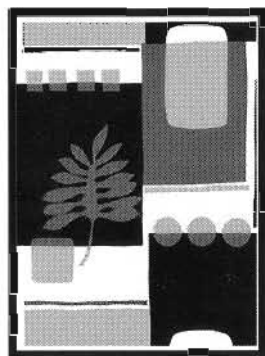
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