

HR HOME & GARDEN

MONTHLY

MARCH 2001

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FURNISHING YOUR GREAT OUTDOORS

BY VINCENT RHODES





PHOTO COURTESY OF KETTLER, OSLO COLLECTION



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If you're like most homeowners, you're spending more money on landscaping than in previous years. You're probably also spending more time in the yard to enjoy that investment. Selecting the right outdoor furniture can help you make the most of that leisure time.

Your first instinct may be to shop mass merchants and discount stores. After all, the prices are generally low. And with celebrities like Martha Stewart endorsing the furniture, it can't be bad. But the quality and choices may be greater at specialty stores.

"More work goes in to upper-end lines," Cherry Durand, furniture product manager for Great Atlantic explains. "Just because a frame is aluminum and won't rust doesn't mean the paint won't peel. When you buy furniture from a quality store, it's going to last."

She adds, "People get tired of the furniture before they have to replace it."

But picking the perfect outdoor furniture is no easy task. You can find just about any material to suit virtually any taste and budget.

RESIN

Generally, resin furniture is the least expensive. It's perfect for use near a swimming pool because it resists chlorine better than most other materials. Another advantage is that it's very low-maintenance—just hose it down.

One downside to resin is that it can be porous and prone to stains. This is especially true if the furniture is placed directly below trees where sap and acid from leaves can attack surfaces.

Expect to pay around \$500 for a middle-of-the-line, five-piece grouping (four chairs plus table). But you can spend much less or much more.

EXTRUDED AND CAST ALUMINUM

Extruded aluminum is the number one selling outdoor furniture material, according to Durand. This hollow aluminum can be shaped into a variety of styles and comes in a variety of colors and textures. You'll usually find this material paired with sling or strap seating.

"Sling furniture dries immediately," Durand says. "It doesn't hold moisture which helps prevent mildew and dry rot. Best of all, it can pour down rain at 5 o'clock and you can still have guests arrive at 5:15

and sit on it."

As the slings wear out, it's no problem to replace them. Some companies will make those replacements for free, Durand says. That's not a bad deal considering a middle-of-the-line, five-piece group costs about \$800 to \$900.

The extruded aluminum frames are sturdy yet lightweight making them easy to move. That may be their one disadvantage. In high winds, the furniture can be blown over.

Not so for cast aluminum. It's much heavier and just as resistant to rust as extruded pieces. That's a definite advantage in Hampton Roads where it's virtually impossible to escape the salt air.

Manufacturers offer cast aluminum furniture in a variety of styles including ornate designs perfect for garden seating. Along with the heavier weight comes a heftier price tag. This material is one of the most expensive available.

WROUGHT IRON

Traditionally, wrought iron has been a fairly inexpensive option for outdoor furnishings. And, because it's steel, it doesn't always hold up well.

If you've inherited an older wrought iron furniture set, hang on to it, Durand says. Older wrought iron included other metals in the alloy giving it more resistance to rust. Companies can't use those combinations anymore, so the result is more vulnerability to the sea-side environment.

Enter Kettler International's sintered wrought iron furniture. According to Scott Maise, sales manager for Kettler, the company's sturdy and stylish line is painted using a process that allows the frame to adhere 10 times more paint than average aluminum furniture.

"It protects the steel from rusting," Maise says. "In the paint, we put aluminum flakes and resin along with the pigments. That makes our furniture 50 percent less affected by the heat of the sun." If rust does appear, sand the affected area and use touch-up paint to make repairs.

You can find a wide range of styles for prices ranging anywhere from \$499 to \$2,600.

1: Metal outdoor furnishings provide function as well as beauty.

2: Plastic chairs are a less expensive alternative.

3: Teak chairs add a special rustic touch to any back yard.



NATURAL AND SYNTHETIC WICKER

This category is somewhat a misnomer, because wicker is a style of weaving as opposed to a material. Wicker furniture offers a more traditional look and, in the past, it was made of natural material and was largely relegated to sunrooms and screened porches. This offered the wood some protection from the elements and extended the life of the furniture.

Synthetic wicker furniture is formed from a frame of aluminum tubing wrapped with vinyl. Because a non-natural fiber is used, synthetic wicker tends to hold up better in the yard or at poolside.

One disadvantage to both the natural and synthetic products is that the tight weave traps dirt. As a result, it's more difficult to clean and requires more maintenance.

An average five-piece grouping will cost about \$1,000.

TEAK AND JARRAH WOOD

When customers come in to purchase teak furniture it's because they have a love for the material. "They've already made up their minds," says Kettler sales consultant Brigitte Golay, the richly colored hardwood is incredibly durable and weathers to a silver-gray. "Virginia Beach chose teak for its boardwalk benches because it will last," Durand says. "Those benches hold up. They don't look brand new, but they are withstanding the environment well."

When your furniture is properly cared for, you can expect it to last and to retain its beauty. Golay warns against overprotecting your teak. Seal it and the wood can't breathe. Cover it to protect it from rain and the wood dries out and cracks. She suggests that customers oil it once a year.

Jarraah, a Western Australian wood, offers similar characteristics to teak with a comparable look.

Price depends on the amount of wood used and the detail desired. But it is definitely a higher-end material. Teak furniture groups with very ornate carvings can sell for as much as \$5,000, Maise says.

STAINLESS STEEL AND NEW TRENDS

Stainless steel may be making a comeback this season, according to Kettler marketing manager Isabelle Kintziger. "Stainless steel has

been around," she says. "But for the most part it was used in discount stores and in lower-end lines. The image that companies are trying to project now with stainless steel is much more upscale. They are doing that with the design of the furniture and by combining it with teak."

In fact, you're likely to see quite a few metal and wood combinations. "Last season the trend of mixing materials really picked up," Kintziger says. "And it's continuing this year."

Also look for the move to earth tones to continue. The popularity of tone-on-tone and more muted colors is not surprising, Durand says. Because people are investing so much in their landscaping and home exterior, they want furniture that compliments a look, not something that steals attention from it.

Kintziger says that customers don't have to give up on color.

"This area is always a bit out of the norm because we are a resort town. Bright colors and nautical themes seem to work well."

You may be surprised by some of the cushion fabrics this season, she adds. Look for chenille to make an appearance. It's reported to hold up well with little stretching.

PLANNING YOUR PURCHASE

Kintziger says that industry-wide people generally spend around \$1,100 dollars when purchasing outdoor furniture in the specialty market. But the purchase doesn't have to break your budget.

Durand offers a few tips to shoppers. First, because specialty stores offer diverse product lines, you can easily find the material you want at a price you can afford. And in some cases you only have to make small sacrifices.

"For extruded aluminum, \$899 will buy you a middle-range, good-quality group," Durand says. "But we can also sell sets for \$699, \$599 or \$499. They just aren't as fancy—some of the detail may be left out."

You can also consider purchasing a few pieces of furniture at a time. If you deal with a specialty store on a name-brand line, it's easy to buy a dining set this season and then add chaise lounges next year.

It's also possible to mix furniture types effectively. Just carry a color theme through on the frames, on the cushions or with the umbrellas. "If you have the same color umbrella down by the pool as you have up on the deck, it presents a very unified look," Durand explains. **HR**

Keep it clean

Scott Maise, sales manager for Kettler International, says that with proper care, there's no reason that quality outdoor furniture can't become a family heirloom. He offers the following tips for keeping your furnishings looking their best:

❖ **Lather, rinse, repeat.** Maise advises that you treat your outdoor furniture like you would treat your car. "If you leave your car parked under a tree and never wash it, the finish will be ruined." The same is true for your furniture regardless of the material.

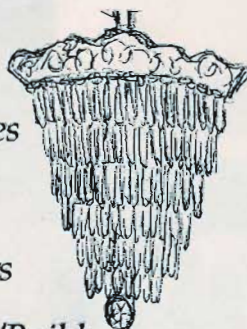
❖ **Take a bite out of grime.** Mildew is a big problem in coastal areas. It results from bacteria breeding on dirt and grime that fall onto your furniture. Your best line of defense is periodically rinsing the frame and properly drying the cushions.

❖ **Take it easy.** Use a mild soap, a light brush and the garden hose. "If it won't mar the car, it won't mar casual furniture."

❖ **Have realistic expectations.** "Just because it's called outdoor furniture doesn't mean Mother Nature doesn't affect it." A little effort can significantly extend the life of your furniture.

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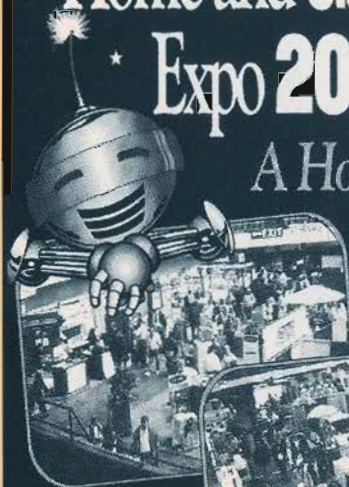
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