



gardening

Outdoor entertaining
Weatherproof your patio

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Rain doesn't stop play

Don't let this year's wet summer put you off al fresco entertaining – there are practical ways to stay dry. By **Pattie Barron**

Our summers are predicted to get warmer and wetter, so how do you create a more flexible outdoor space that you can enjoy whatever the weather, without resorting to bubble wrapping the balcony – yes, I know someone who has done just that – or covering over the entire garden? Plants don't mind getting wet but people do, so consider making your patio or terrace weatherproof – or creating a designated space in the garden for dining and entertaining.

Footprint issues

If you're more likely to have friends around in the early evening, choose a spot where you can enjoy the late-day rays, but allow for an adequate platform so that guests don't pull back their dining chairs and fall into a flower bed. Raised beds to define the space are a good wheeze because they surround the area with plants, making it feel enclosed. They can double as seating, too, making extra perch places if you're throwing a party.

Flooring that doesn't get slippery or disintegrate through excesses of rain is essential. Wet slate looks as lovely as raindrops on roses, but is treacherous underfoot. Ridged softwood decking is supposed to be slip-proof, but in wet conditions becomes banana-skin lethal. "You need a hardwood deck to withstand wet weather," says Patricia Fox, head of Aralia Garden Design.

"Price wise, it's comparable to a stone terrace. Wood is warmer underfoot, and with a young family, is safer when children fall. My choice is balau – it's an exotic hardwood at a keen price and it ages quickly to silver.

"There's a new option: bamboo, which is pressure treated to make it as durable as hardwood. It's dark, glossy and maintains its colour. Another plus is sustainability: it grows so fast."

Quality build

Garden designer Charlotte Rowe, renowned for creating streamlined outdoor spaces for well-to-do Londoners, stresses the importance of good installation. "The frame of the deck must be properly protected against damp. The point is that you can do a terrific kitchen with cheap carcasses and shiny fronts. You can't do a cheap garden and expect it to last. You need stainless-steel nails, screws and brackets. Take short cuts, and the garden will rust and rot."

Rowe favours Portuguese limestone for paving. "It makes a clean, architectural look and is easy to maintain. We use a lightly honed or leathered stone, which are both safer to walk on. Never, ever use polished stone outside."



Under-cover party

If you have a pop-up gazebo handy, you can have a pop-up party. Forget the flimsy variety with a lightweight frame that guests have to cling on to so it doesn't fly up, up and away. "I have two brilliant gazebos for £195, each from TFI, that stay put with no strings attached," says Rox, who frequently holds parties in her Hertfordshire garden.

"Instead, the poles are secured by circular metal weights around their bases. They're totally waterproof, with solid steel frames, and take less than a minute to pop up. I chose black, which looks smart; white gets dirty quickly."

Shade sails are handy to cover a patio or terrace adjoining the house, but aren't always waterproof, so invest in the best. "Sailing companies such as C&J Marine or Dolphin Sails, where they custom-make one for you, often offer better prices than garden suppliers," says Fox. "Bear in mind they need to be angled for water to discharge, and you must use a tensioning kit, because if you don't, water will puddle."

At this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show, more people asked about the crisp white awning that covered a large part of Fox's Rooftop Workplace show garden than anything else in it. "It's from Superior Awnings and is the answer to completely waterproofing your terrace as well as shading it from the sun," says Fox. "The cost was under £3,000. You can have any width, and up to 3.5m [11.5ft] extension from the house. The trick is to order the metal frame in a colour, because plain stainless steel looks nasty; if your window

Weather savvy: The Landform Garden, right, at this year's Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, featured waterproof furniture and sensible, non-slip flooring; the Rooftop Workplace of Tomorrow garden at Chelsea, by Patricia Fox, above, had a waterproof canopy

frames are painted blue, have a similar shade. And I chose a plain fabric: no frilly edges, no patterns."

For a more permanent structure, consider a pergola. At her Devon home, garden designer Clare Matthews constructed a handsome pergola above a dining area from roofing battens nailed into a framework at an angle, so they deflect a light rain shower, as well as providing shade; simple and clever. "Pergolas are so underused in this country," says Rowe.

"If your dining or entertaining space is small, instead of timber, you could have one made from strong steel, which has a smaller profile. To make it waterproof, you could have sailcloth cabled across the top of the structure, like a yacht."

Warmth and comfort

Heating your outdoor room will dramatically increase the time you can spend in it. Firepits and fireplaces that use ethanol (ethyl alcohol) are eco-friendlier than ugly gas-guzzling patio heaters.

"Take a look at the beautifully designed bioethanol fireplaces that have a decorative flame, produce a lot of heat and need no chimney," says Fox. "And you can move them around, which is useful if you entertain a lot. I've got my eye on a circular one from Enccompass."

Think of outdoor furniture as an investment, buying quality that lasts whatever the weather delivers. Rusted metal is a great look for plant supports, but not for chairs, and softwood will fall apart eventually. Properly sourced teak is expensive but should last a lifetime.

For lounging around anytime of day, weatherproof mesh or weave sofas in modular units look inviting, can be moved around to suit the number of guests and, provided the frames are weatherproof, will last through the year without the need for nasty plastic covers.

Have fun dressing up your dining area or entertaining space – but don't be cheap and drag out the living room cushions. Bold stripes and jazzy prints in lively colours suit outdoor living, and suggest sunshine. You can find great weatherproof fabrics for cushions, banquettes and tablecloths from high-end companies such as Osborne & Little and Designers Guild. An outdoor mat and a table runner in a vibrant, plant-flattering colour will do much to offset a visual overload of plain weathered timber.

Bring on the hurricane lamps and tea-light holders for the most charming candlelight (see page 2 for three examples) – but make sure your guests don't break their necks en route, so steps and paths should be clearly lit. "What's important is to put in lighting at the same time as the terrace or patio is being installed," says Fox, "and have lighting done professionally, so that cables are properly buried. I wouldn't rely on solar lighting. And I use lighting not just at night but on dull days, too; adds a bit of a zing."

Plant a good impression

Concentrate planting around your entertaining area, and the impression will be that the whole garden is full of flower. "I plant a lot of *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' in town gardens because the white flower heads keep going for ages, they thrive in shade and hold their shape through winter," says Rowe. "They also look rather glamorous."

You can screen off the space, making it feel more intimate, with troughs of bamboo that rustle in the wind; a line of tall *Verbena bonariensis* makes a soft summer veil.

"Statistically, our summers are going to get wetter, so go for lush tropical planting with ferns, bamboos and large-leaved evergreens that grow fast in wet weather and look wonderful in the rain," suggests Fox. "They'll work well in containers, too."

"I'd also suggest adding a dollop of vibrant colour to the mix, to lift the spirits. New Guinea busy lizzies, with their large, cheery, unstoppable flower heads, whatever the weather, look terrific in country-garden plantings and terrific in jungle settings."

This is the summer to make your garden sizzle – in a different way.

© Pattie Barron is the gardening editor of Homes & Property in the Evening Standard

