

SUMMER!

Time for Easy Outdoor Living

ARTICLE AND PHOTO BY MARK F. JOHNSON

For the next few months, much of the gathering and entertaining will be outdoors on the patio, deck, backyard or rooftop deck. And there will probably be a barbecue grill involved.

So how do you style a party under the stars? By its nature, summer entertaining should be stress free. The focus is on enjoying the outdoors, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't put your best, sandaled or flip-flopped foot forward.

Seating/Tables

When thinking about how to "arrange"

your guests, consider that if you're entertaining a large group of folks then chances are most people will be standing. This might be especially true if you are hosting a July 4th party and you're lucky enough to have a view of the downtown skyline from your roof deck where guests have an uninterrupted view of the fireworks. But you should still have ample seating for your guests. Three or more smaller tables, depending on the number of guests, is usually better than having one large table for everybody, and also easier to set up. Banquet-style seating helps people to better mingle and promotes eas-

ier conversation than one large table. Each table will find its own "personality" based on who sits there. Let your guests choose where to sit. Stress-free, remember?

Lighting

Lighting is also important at a night-time outdoor party. Lots of folks string lights across their deck or fence walls as well as provide foot lights along the deck or patio floor. These help to set a nice mood without being too bright or overwhelming. Tiki torches are also hot, literally and figuratively, and really can set a great



mood. Overhead lighting extended from one side to the other is great too if the space is small enough to make it feasible. On the individual tables, place candles and, if you have a pool or fountain, you can put floating votives on the water. Citronella candles make the most sense because they serve the dual purpose of repelling bugs and also providing light.

Table Top

The table tops can hold more than just candles and plates and cups. Go ahead and put some fresh flowers on the table and also put some potted plants or trees on the deck or the patio. I would steer away from decorating with too much "theme" paraphernalia because frankly that can get a little tired. City slickers don't really want a picture of Yankee Doodle Dandy pasted on the deck wall or popping up on the table top. They might prefer a beautiful palm tree or ficus tree with white or blue lights strung on it, though. If you must do a little bit of July 4 decorating, maybe some strands of silver, red and blue tinsel hanging on the trees can provide it.

As for dinner-ware, again, my suggestion would be to pass on the red, white and blue paper plates, or the ones that have greetings or characters on them---unless of course you're planning a kid's party. Try the clear, heavy plastic dinner ware or perhaps the white, silver or pale blue, green or yellow plates and cups that almost feel like real china. I would say that "silver ware" should be clear or silver plastic if you don't want to use the real thing.

Chill Out

You want your party to rock, right?? So of course you want to have music. Try to keep the cd player hidden if you have to bring it outside. This should go without

saying but...don't let the music overtake the party. In other words, play music, whatever the style, that fades into the background. Jazz, lounge or chill music works best for this kind of party unless you want your guests to bust a dance move too.

Special Effects

If you have the space, set up a separate bar area to the side, perhaps flanked with trees and nicely but softly lit. And if you're concerned about how much your guests might imbibe, then have someone serve as bartender. Remember to keep on hand a supply of cut lemons, limes and orange slices for twists. A nice old-fashioned shiny aluminum trash can filled with ice makes a better looking ice chest than an actual ice chest.

Keep refuse receptacles on hand. Tall, woven baskets lined with plastic make nice trash cans for outdoor use.

Also, for effect, consider putting a Turkish or ersatz Turkish runner on your deck or patio that extends from the door from your house that leads out to the patio or deck, sort of like a "red carpet." This brings a nice North African elegance while still being low key. If you don't have a Turkish rug to put outside, consider getting an inexpensive runner that is tasteful, perhaps with a pop of color since it will be dark outside. Summer is the season to use bright colors that you might turn a cold shoulder to at other times of year. If you have a settee or two, put patterned throw pillows on them to complete the Moroccan effect.

It's your party, but no crying allowed! If your guests see you having a good time and mixing and mingling and not looking tired and stressed out, that will certainly heighten their enjoyment as well.



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