

BEST PRACTICES: Fire Pit Building

by Alli Rael & Andrew Soto



Above At this residence in Idaho Falls, Idaho, Tyler Washburn of Outback Landscape constructed this 4' diameter fire pit and surrounding seating from Belgard 'Stone-gate Country Manor' retaining wall blocks. The cap for the gas fire feature is attached with retaining wall specific glue.

One practical way for landscape contractors to add warmth and inviting light to any landscape is to build a gas or wood-burning fire pit. These fire features are straightforward to build and can be purchased in pre-manufactured kits or be custom built on site.

To get a sense of what is involved in building a fire pit, LC/DBM talked to some professionals with hands-on experience.

Determining Drainage Needs

Working with four crewmembers, Jorge Castellanos, owner and lead contractor for New York landscaping firm Aztlan Outdoor Living, excavated 9" down, graded the soil and installed a geotextile fabric liner. After this was completed, drainage was integrated into the foundation to channel stormwater away from the fire pit. According to the contractor, this is one of the most overlooked and critical steps.

"Any contractor building a fire pit should plan for drainage and maintaining it," said Castellanos. "Every two to three years maintenance has to be performed: ash and debris must be cleared from the joints around the pavers. This will prevent damage to the fire

pit footing and structure by allowing water to drain properly."

"If you don't have good airflow and drainage, you can get rain in the bottom of the fire pit and that can create some damage," said Tyler Washburn from Outback Landscape. "Especially if you have an electric start on a gas fire pit."

Nathan Boliek of TDH Landscaping built wood burning fire pits for two clients. Both units were set on slopes, creating the need for adequate drainage.

"Improper drainage will allow water to collect in the pit and cause damage to the unit while also creating a breeding ground for mosquitos," said Boliek.

Sizing Up The Job

Boliek recommends not building a fire pit more than 12" in height.

"When most people sit by a fire they want their hands and feet to be warm," he said. "Pre-fab units are 18" to 24" which do not allow heat to make it below the knee."

Tyler Washburn of Outback Landscape created a fire pit that was 4' in diameter and about 28" tall. He recommends a 4' diameter pit if you're using gas, but says that a 3' diameter one works well for smaller residences.

"Anything over 5' diameter starts to become a safety hazard," he advises.

Kelly Karp from Landscape Design Services Inc. in Michigan built a fire pit with exterior diameter of 5', noting, "That size is pretty common."

Fire bowls come in all shapes and sizes and can be custom manufactured to meet the project's specifications. The 'Simplicity' fire bowl that Debbie Gliksmann of Urban Oasis specified for a Southern California project was 4' in diameter.

Jorge Castellanos noted that heat could be an issue with gas units. "If you build them too big they can get too hot, not something you would want near a patio," said Castellanos.

How Close is Too Close?

Seating arrangements around fire features can be as diverse as the fire features themselves. Opinions differ as to how far seating should be from the fire pit for optimum comfort.

Jorge Castellanos opted to design and build a 5' diameter fire pit and s-shaped seatwall.

"If you have the seating too far from the fire you won't feel a thing; if it is too close it will be too hot," said Castellanos. "I've found that two to three feet works the best."

Above In Michigan, Kelly Karp of Landscape Design Services Inc. created a landscape to inspire fun, activities and memories, including a fire pit in the backyard. Karp recommends checking state and local ordinances for fire pit regulations, as every location will be different. Because the outdoor kitchen also needed gas, a licensed professional had to come out and increase the gas meter on the house. PHOTO: WILLIAM HEBERT

Left At this Southern California residence, contractor Stanislaw Krupa installed the Landscape designed by Debbie Gliksmann of Urban Oasis Landscape Design. The gas line had already been run under the existing paving, so it was just a matter of placing the custom 'Simplicity Edge' fire bowl.

