

REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

How to Avoid the 5 Worst Outdoor-Entertaining Mistakes

Summer shindigs present more opportunities for hosting gaffes than do indoor parties, so we asked design and event pros which ones they see most often and what to do instead



WHEN ENTERTAINING OUTDOORS, you can make missteps before you've even swept the patio. Your invitation, for example, shouldn't omit crucial info. "Is the event rain or shine? Can guests expect cocktails and nibbles or a 10-course dinner?" rattled off Susan Jory, an interior designer in London, Ontario. "Spell it out."

And the party itself is a minefield of potential gaffes, made more treacherous by most yards' dearth of shelter. To help you host a peerless al fresco party this season, we canvassed entertaining and design experts for common mistakes and the wisest ways to avoid them.



A carpet-topped wall adds additional seating at a home outside Asilah, featured in 'Morocco,' by Catherine Scotto (Prestel)

PHOTO: NICOLAS MATHEUS

Elemental Blunders

The most-mentioned oversight? Failing to consider that guests themselves will barbecue if you don't provide shade during a daytime party, and will be miserable if sunset ushers in a chill.

Instead: "Plan ahead," said Ms. Jory. "Borrow all the neighborhood patio umbrellas." As a chic alternative, Kellie Burke, an interior designer in West Hartford, Conn., suggests sail shades, large tarps that you hoist and secure overhead to block rays but let air through.

To counter evening cool-offs, heat lamps and blankets can help. Ted Kennedy Watson, owner of the Watson Kennedy design stores in Seattle, recalled an outdoor party whose host draped the chair backs in scarves. "As the evening got cold, they were meant for guests to put on shoulders or legs," he said. "Afterwards, it was your party gift."

Generic Outdoor Décor

Interior designer Mark Eckstrom of Maison MxM, in Omaha, Neb., ticked off the elements of the most routine outside-entertaining aesthetic—all to be avoided: "Mason-jar glasses, mini-chalkboard menus with exaggerated calligraphy, galvanized steel buckets as wine chillers and baskets of 'Rosé All Day' paper napkins."

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Instead: Think outside the big-box stores, said Mr. Eckstrom, whose firm adopted a surrealist theme for a recent party. Riffs on the concept included Fornasetti keyhole pillows and bowler-hat place cards staked to Granny Smith apples, a nod to painter René Magritte's

millinery motif. Layering in cozy elements can also make a party stand out. To add softness underfoot and an unexpected homey note, “I suggest buying inexpensive vintage rugs,” said Boston designer Nina Farmer.



At a Farm River Farm, East Haven, Conn., dinner party, architect Jocelyn Dickson’s snaking ‘Lady Table’ builds in plenty of opportunities for seated folks to chat with nearby guests.

PHOTO: JOHNNY FOGG

A Dim View

For the sort of just-right illumination that spurs conviviality and averts spills, neither a glaring floodlight or wan string of Edison bulbs will do.

Instead: Aim for warm lighting that emanates from multiple levels. “Make a space even cozier with a perimeter of large lanterns,” said designer Dakota Willimon of Charleston, S.C., who also likes to tuck small flameless—and windproof—tea lights among low tabletop floral arrangements. Portable table lamps, which can be set on the ground, also work wonders for creating an ambient glow.

Limiting Seating

“There’s nothing worse than being seated in a spot where you’re cut off from all but one or two people,” said Ms. Dickson. Susie Novak, an Oakland, Calif., interior designer, finds shuffling in and out of a long bench in a sundress vexing.

Instead: Limit benches to two-seaters, and think beyond dining tables. Denver interior designer Julie Brayton sets small benches or lounge chairs in unexpected corners so guests can move about. If you’re lucky, you can exploit your hardscaping. “A broad set of steps or a low wall with outdoor pillows will allow for smaller conversation groups,” said designer Billy Ceglia of Palm Beach, Fla.

Sensory Offenses

Aggressive odors like citronella and trash, as well as neighborhood noise, can be the unforeseen foes of a backyard gathering. “Hosts curate a meticulous menu but can overlook partygoers’ four other senses,” said Richmond, Va., designer Sara Hillery.

Instead: To keep mosquitoes at bay, use natural citrus sprays, not artificial bug repellents, suggests Ms. Hillery, and set refuse receptacles upwind or at a distance. Mask the sound of traffic or trains with tunes or (admittedly not easy) a water feature, said design director Jennifer Durand, of Jessica Lagrange Interiors in Chicago. If you’re rocking a party playlist, “don’t blast music from inside the home,” said Ms. Burke. “Invest in a good quality portable outdoor speaker.”

Party Bloopers

Ill-timed sprinklers and other event wreckers





ILLUSTRATION: FABIO CONSOLI

“I would highly recommend **checking your sprinkler system** before a big outdoor event...especially if that outdoor event is your wedding reception and your future wife asked you no less than a dozen times to verify that the sprinklers won’t go off during the reception.” [See this video showing the mayhem.](#) —*Mark Brayton, interior designer, Denver*

“Don’t make the mistake of **setting charcuterie out too soon!** Cheese starts to sweat and jam starts to melt in the heat. Neither looks appetizing and gets the meal off on the wrong foot.” —*Lindye Galloway, interior designer, Costa Mesa, Calif.*

“I had an **overserved guest** fall into my backyard pond one time when getting out of their seat.” —*Jennifer Durand, design director, Jessica Lagrange Interiors, Chicago*

“I went to an outdoor bridal shower where the host had set up the most incredible balloon arch! Unfortunately it was a **windy, hot Midwestern day**...and sadly, the balloons did not fare well in those conditions.” —*Julie Blanner, entertaining and décor expert, St. Louis*

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