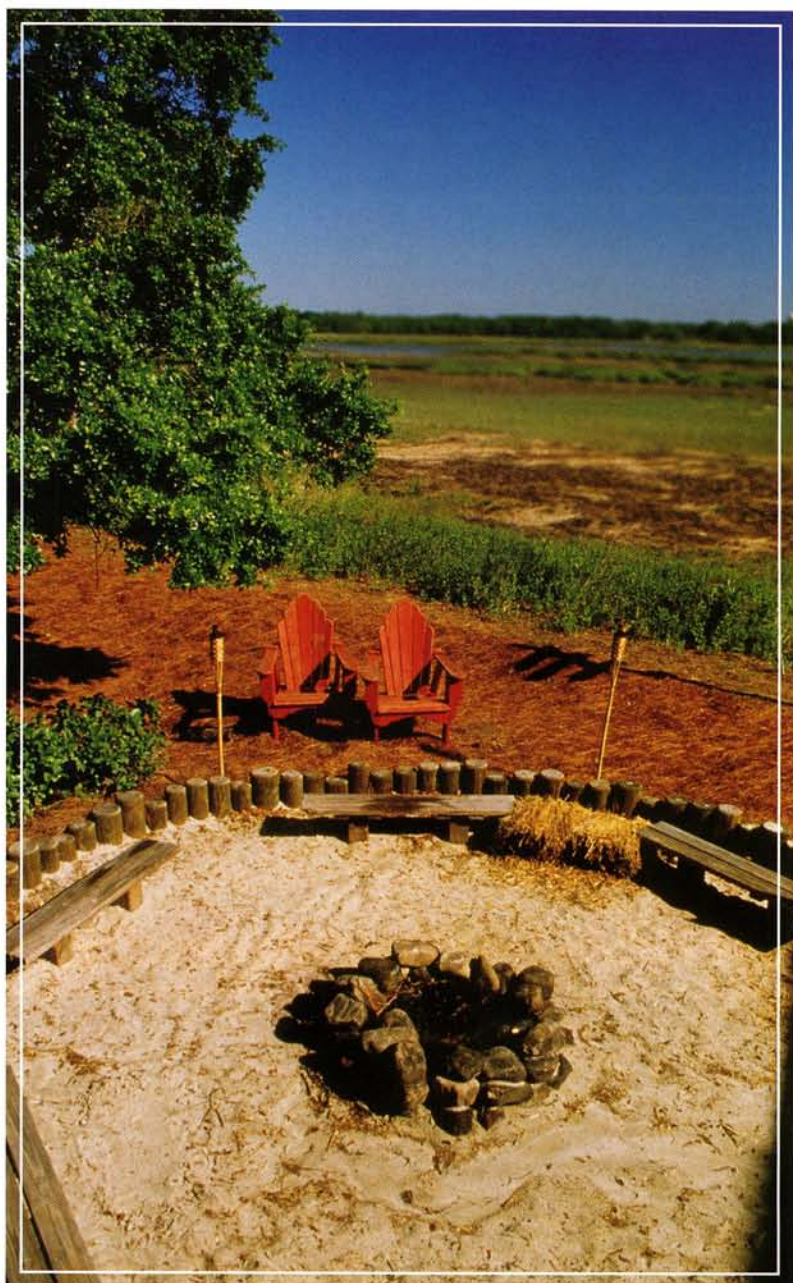


Since the caveman's first encounter with a **spark**, humankind has been fascinated by fire. We stare **with wonder** at the burning logs as they slowly transform into hot, **glowing embers**. Maybe it's a guy thing, but who out there can resist picking up the poker and stoking a **COZY** campfire? With today's ever-changing home landscapes, **fire pits** (or fire rings) are being requested of landscape architects and designers **more now than ever**. Here are some tips to consider if you want to add this alluring piece to **your landscape**.



Photos by Garry Menendez

# burning embers

Create a relaxing fire pit for your garden

By Garry L. Menendez, RLA



## PICKING A GREAT SPOT

As with any landscape element, choosing a location for a fire pit is crucial. It might be obvious to many, but we're primarily talking about the backyard here. Like water features, I suggest tucking this type of feature into a secluded part of the garden rather than in a place open to public view. The overall size of the property has much to do with picking a great spot. If your property is larger you may want to make a fire ring a rewarding destination. But pick a site that is not a major focal point of the backyard, because let's face it: most Southerners do not want to be anywhere near a fire between June and August.

I am a big believer in good circulation, as it can tie different garden elements together. If your fire pit is somewhat remote, make sure it is accessible. Planting or leaving too much vegetation around it will not only make it harder to get to, but it also increases the chances of a stray spark finding a dry brush to ignite.

Should your fire pit be further away from the house, make sure you have quick access to water. It's also a good idea to stash a fire extinguisher nearby and let others know its there.

If your property is like others in suburbia, you may not have the opportunity to locate a fire pit in a hidden corner of the lawn. In this case make sure it is placed far enough from your house so as not to threaten your roof with floating embers. If lawn space is a problem, you may want to consider a prefabricated portable device such as one of those ceramic "chimneys" or heavy gauge steel dish, such as those made by Whalen in Macomb, Illinois.

*Hide by the embers under the cover of trees*



*Enjoy a view of the lake by firelight*





## DESIGN AND MATERIALS

Once you have chosen a location, you should start thinking about its appearance. When considering the design of a fire pit, you basically have two choices: a permanent fixture (professionally designed and installed or built-it-yourself) or a portable unit that can be stored when not in use.

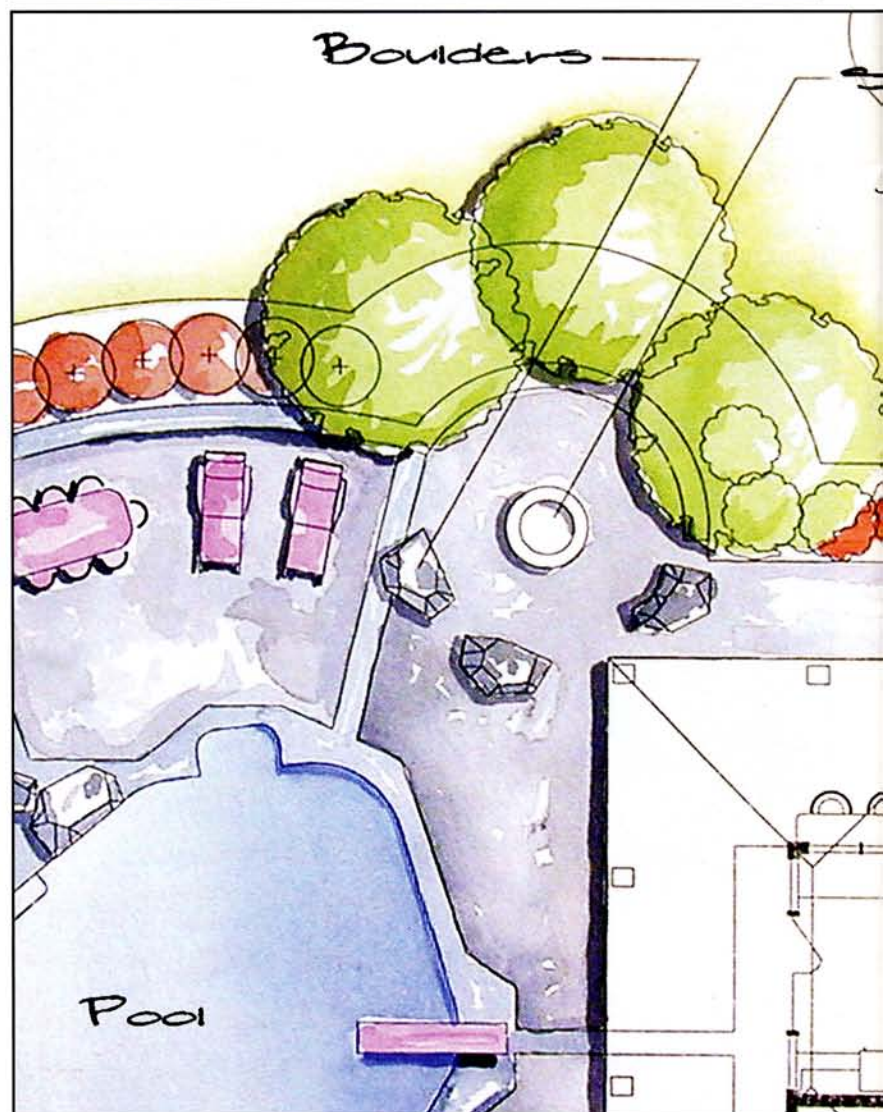
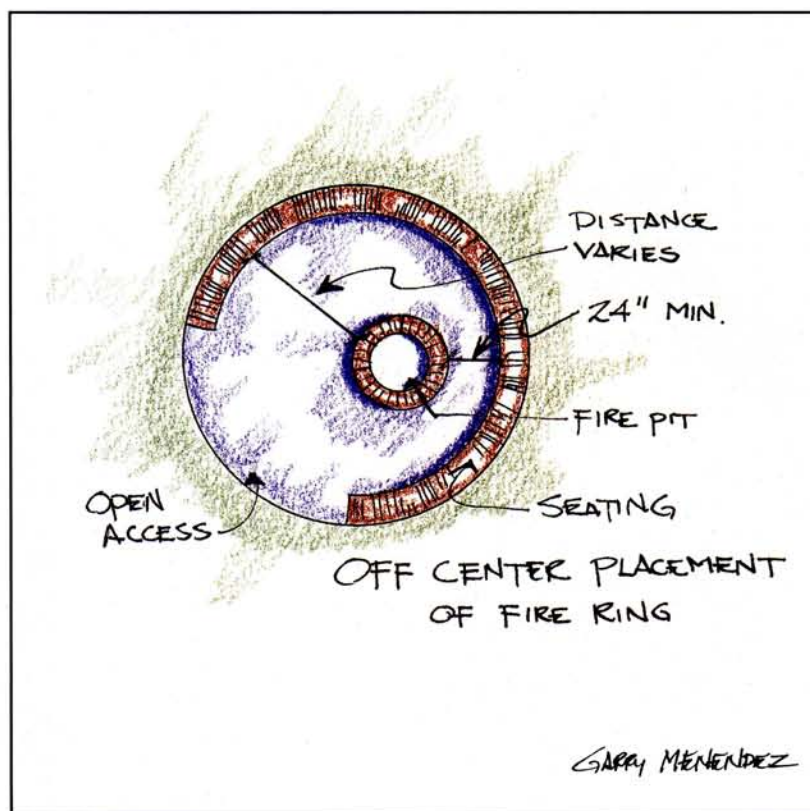
As with most design decisions, begin by looking at what you already have. If your home and garden have a lot of formal features, select materials that complement the setting. Fire pits made of uniform masonry materials, such as brick or cut stone, can enhance your home's current architecture. If your property is rural or less formal, choose a simple circle of rocks to create a laid-back campfire look. If your house is "in between," construct the fire pit and seating out of the same products used in segmental retaining walls. A specialty construction magazine titled *Concrete Masonry Designs* ([www.ncma.org](http://www.ncma.org)) shows a nice example of this in the November 2001 issue.

Next, consider whether or not you will use this fire for cooking. If so, having the ability to incorporate a grill or grate will allow you to toss on some hot dogs without having to wear out your back and arms holding the needed sticks or utensils over the coals. A slew of these versatile products can be found on the Internet; many designs let the grill only cover about half the fire so you can still gaze at exposed flame on the other side. R.J. Thomas Manufacturing of Cherokee, Iowa makes a nice one.

If you decide on a permanent fire pit in a prime seating location, think about constructing a removable top which can transform the pit into a morning coffee table. But do not use the table to keep the java warm!

How big should it be? An interior diameter of about two-and-a-half feet should satisfy your needs. Any smaller and you will only have room for kindling. But if you make it bigger than two-and-a-half feet, you run the risk of throwing it out of scale with its surroundings. Plus you may be tempted to build fires which are suitable only for large fields or homecoming gatherings. (You really don't want to get to know your local firefighters in this way.)

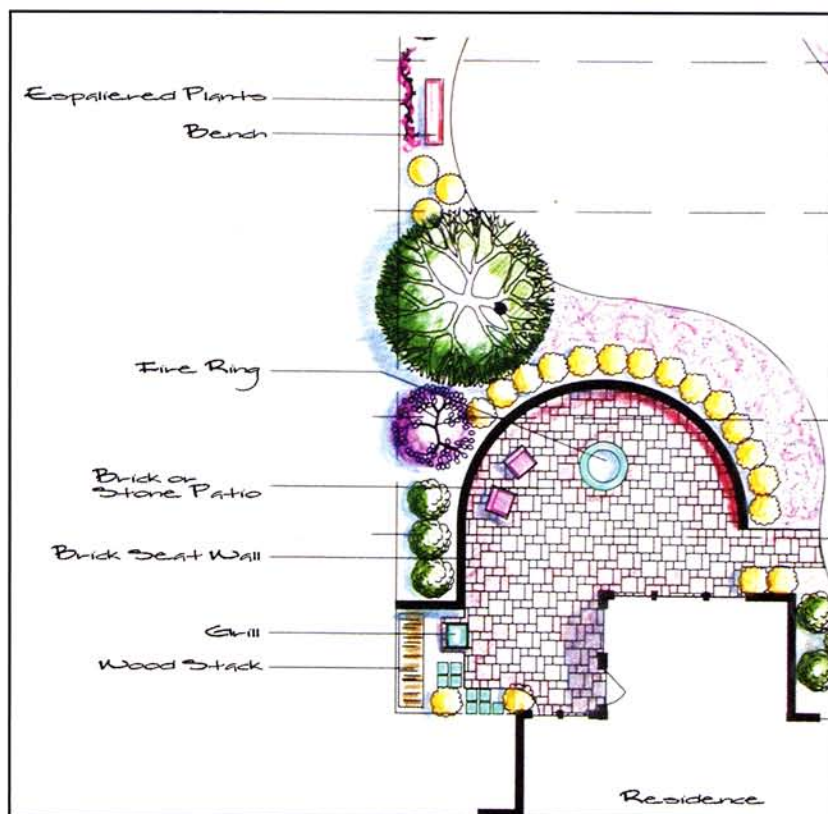
For the interior, you can use fireproof tiles to line the perimeter and six inches of crushed, compacted stone for the base. If a solid base is desired, make sure there is a very slight slope with drainage holes on the low side.



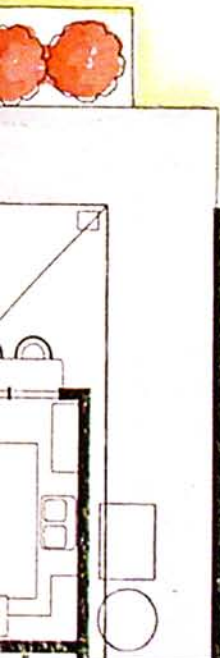


## SEATING

A fire pit without seating is like a pool without water. What's the point? The whole purpose of this activity is to provide a cozy hub on cool nights where you can sing, tell stories or roast marshmallows. If your fire pit and seating are permanent, allow 30 to 36 inches of space between the exterior edge of the pit and any seating. You may want to have a continuous bench type seat designed to cover about half of the fire pit's perimeter. Place this on the opposite side of the higher used area of hardscape and circulation. Be careful not to overdo it with enclosures, for you can create a dangerous situation for someone who wants to quickly back away from a fire. You can always bring in temporary chairs for the big gatherings. If you have permanent seating built around the entire circumference, plan for evenly spaced breaks in four to eight locations. You can also place the fire pit off center from the seating with the minimum distance between them being about 24 inches. This will enable members of the group to sit as close to the fire as they want.



stone Fire Pit  
with  
gravel bottom



*For this formal outdoor setting, storytellers can invite listeners to pull up a chair*



## SAFETY

Safety is your top priority in designing and constructing an outdoor fire pit. Most prefabricated products come with a built-in screen mesh and roof to totally contain the fire. Personally, I prefer a more open look. But when I am using my pit, I make sure I am clear of overhanging trees and close to the hose. You should also check with your local codes on outdoor burning to make sure you are not risking a night in the slammer. Whether you are burning wood or using increasingly popular fuel sources such as propane or natural gas, it is important to never leave a fire unattended by an adult. And make sure all kids present know all of your fire-safety rules.

The next time you're in the backyard and the cold air sends a chill up your spine, don't be so quick to retreat indoors. Grab a jacket, cozy up to your own private campfire, and feast on a s'more. Ghost stories optional. 🦊