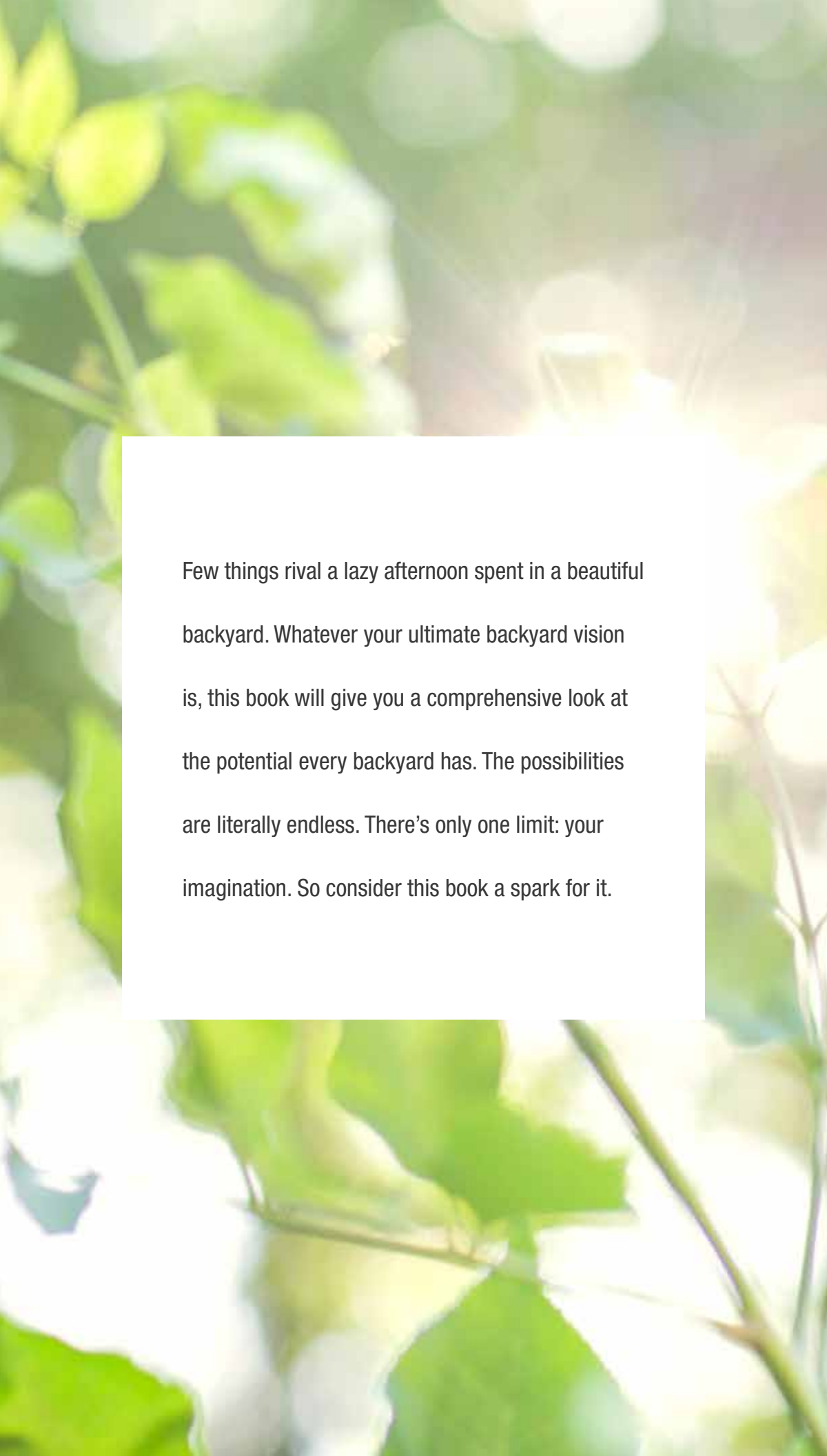
THE ULTIMATE BACKYARD BOOK

YellaWood®
Pressure Treated Pine



Few things rival a lazy afternoon spent in a beautiful backyard. Whatever your ultimate backyard vision is, this book will give you a comprehensive look at the potential every backyard has. The possibilities are literally endless. There's only one limit: your imagination. So consider this book a spark for it.

Building a dream is so much
better than just having one.

BETTER BACKYARDS START WITH EVEN BETTER IDEAS.

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Make your project pin-worthy.

HOW TO CHOOSE A CONTRACTOR

Ask these six questions and find the best match for your project.

CURRENT DEMAND IS VERY HIGH

Home values are recovering and homeowners are finding equity for home improvement projects. But as home improvement spending rises, so does competition for great contractors. It can be challenging. Plenty of guys with just a truck and some tools advertise themselves as home improvement contractors. So savvy homeowners know to compare contractors before they compare prices.

As home improvement spending rises, so does competition for great contractors. Compare contractors before you compare prices.

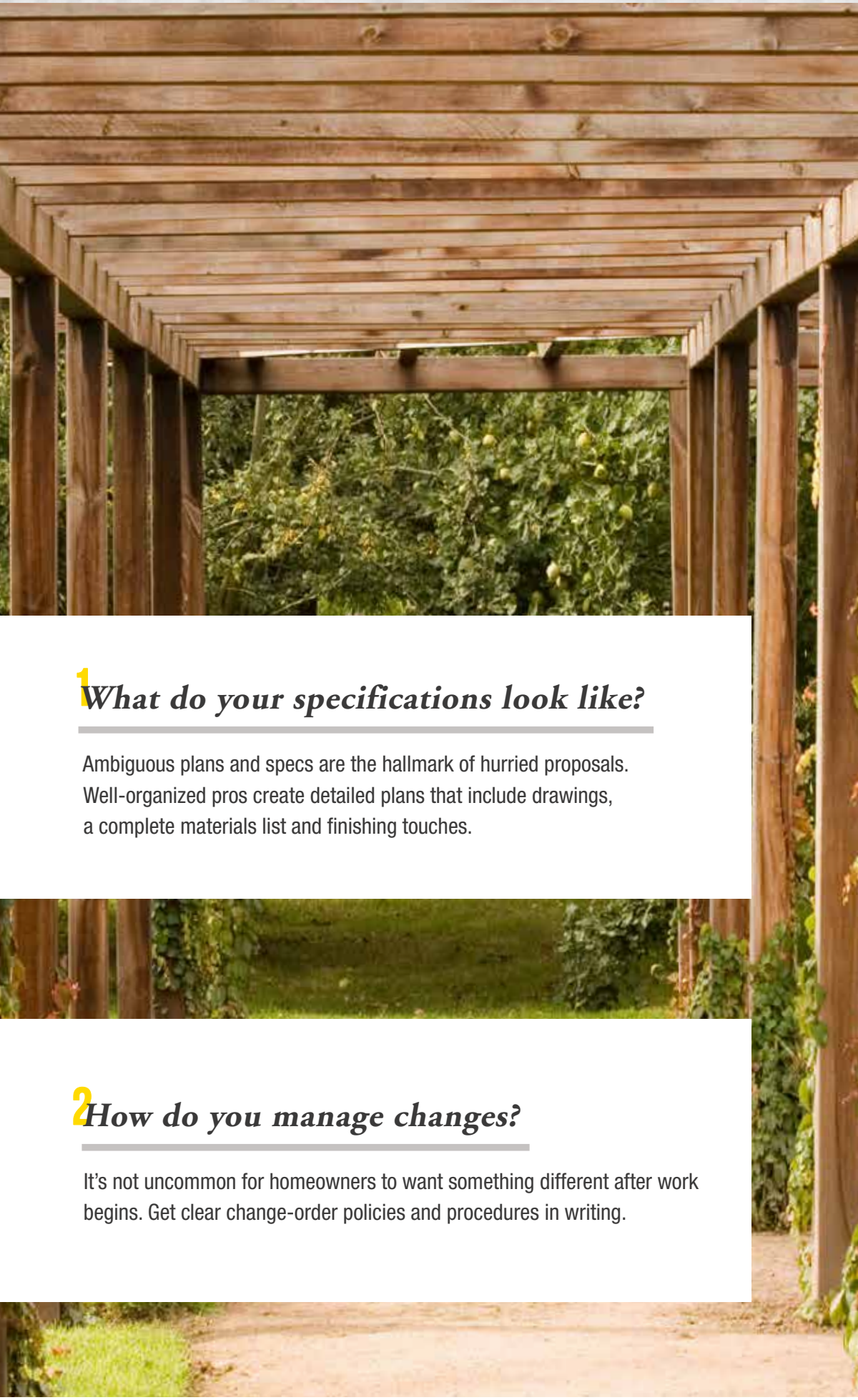
EXPERIENCE IS EVERYTHING

It's always wise to request a list of recent customers and ask about their experiences. The best contractors complete projects on schedule for the agreed-on price. They're great communicators and communicate changes very clearly. Their workers show up every day and keep the work area organized. They stand behind the work long after it's done.

“Great contractors are also great communicators.”

WHAT TO ASK

Interview questions should focus on the contractor's processes. Here are six specifics...



1 What do your specifications look like?

Ambiguous plans and specs are the hallmark of hurried proposals. Well-organized pros create detailed plans that include drawings, a complete materials list and finishing touches.

2 How do you manage changes?

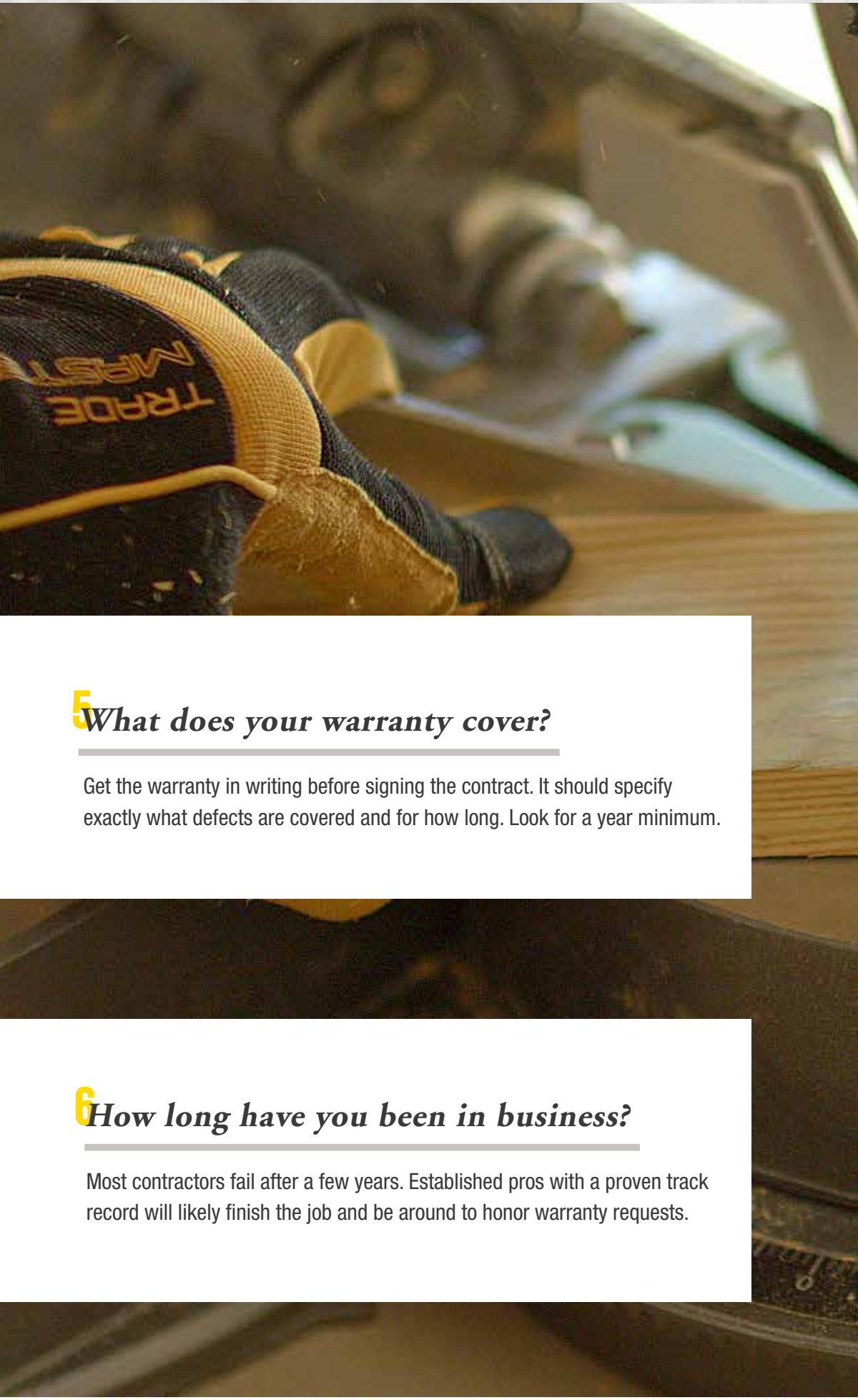
It's not uncommon for homeowners to want something different after work begins. Get clear change-order policies and procedures in writing.

3 Who will run the job?

Ask who's in charge and who oversees the job from start to finish.

4 What insurance and licensing do you have?

You want to see workers' comp, which protects you from lawsuits if a worker gets hurt, and general liability, which covers claims for damage caused by defective work.

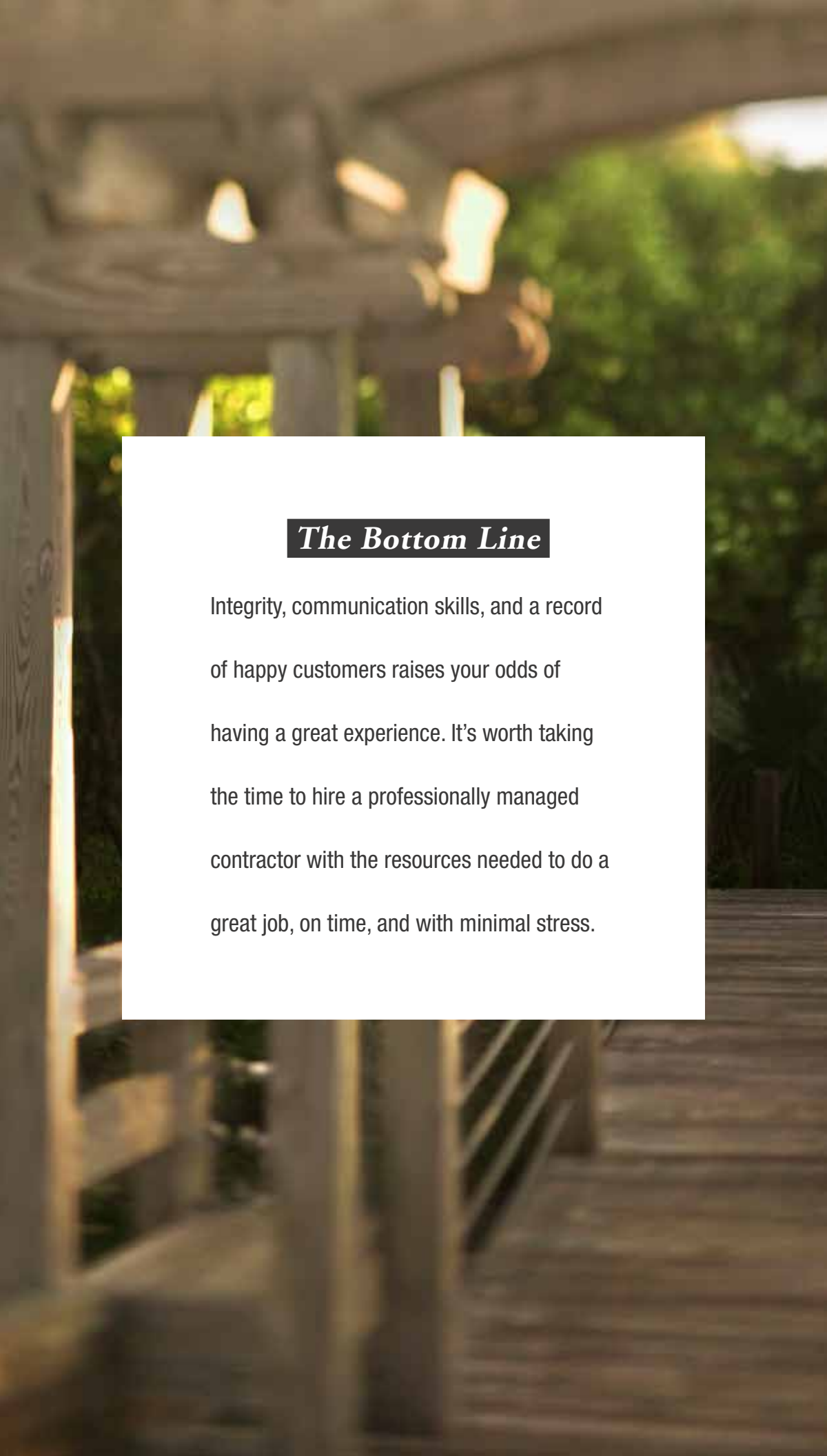


5 What does your warranty cover?

Get the warranty in writing before signing the contract. It should specify exactly what defects are covered and for how long. Look for a year minimum.

6 How long have you been in business?

Most contractors fail after a few years. Established pros with a proven track record will likely finish the job and be around to honor warranty requests.



The Bottom Line

Integrity, communication skills, and a record of happy customers raises your odds of having a great experience. It's worth taking the time to hire a professionally managed contractor with the resources needed to do a great job, on time, and with minimal stress.

Take taking it easy to a whole new level.

KEEPING YOUR DECK SAFE

Building to code is the only way to ensure a safe, durable deck for you and your family.

WHY YOU WANT A PERMIT

Decks must shoulder many burdens—from gale-force winds to four-foot snowfalls to summer dance parties. A permit request triggers an inspection ensuring standards for safe, durable construction are met. Quality contractors welcome code inspections. If a contractor objects to a permit, think seriously about hiring someone else for the job.

SAFETY FIRST

The Reason Behind the Code

Most local building codes are based on the International Residential Code, or IRC, which is updated every two years.

“Google ‘deck collapse’ and you will be greeted with page after page of stories.”

CODES PREVENT:

Structural Failure

Even the pros can sometimes get it wrong. Poor construction techniques can create a lot of problems. "Google 'deck collapse' and you will be greeted with page after page of stories of injuries and deaths from poorly constructed decks," says Glenn Mathewson.

Broken Railings

Code-approved structural connectors make stronger, longer-lasting connections than using nails, screws, or bolts alone.

Racking

"If a tall deck is not properly braced, the fasteners will eventually work loose," says Darryl Byle, a structural engineer in Kalispell, MT.

Tripping Hazards

A stairway leading to a deck is subject to the same rise and run requirements as interior stairs.

Toppling Potential

To protect climbing children, decks more than 30 inches above grade need handrails and guardrails that meet the same 36-inch height requirements for those inside the house.

Fire Hazard

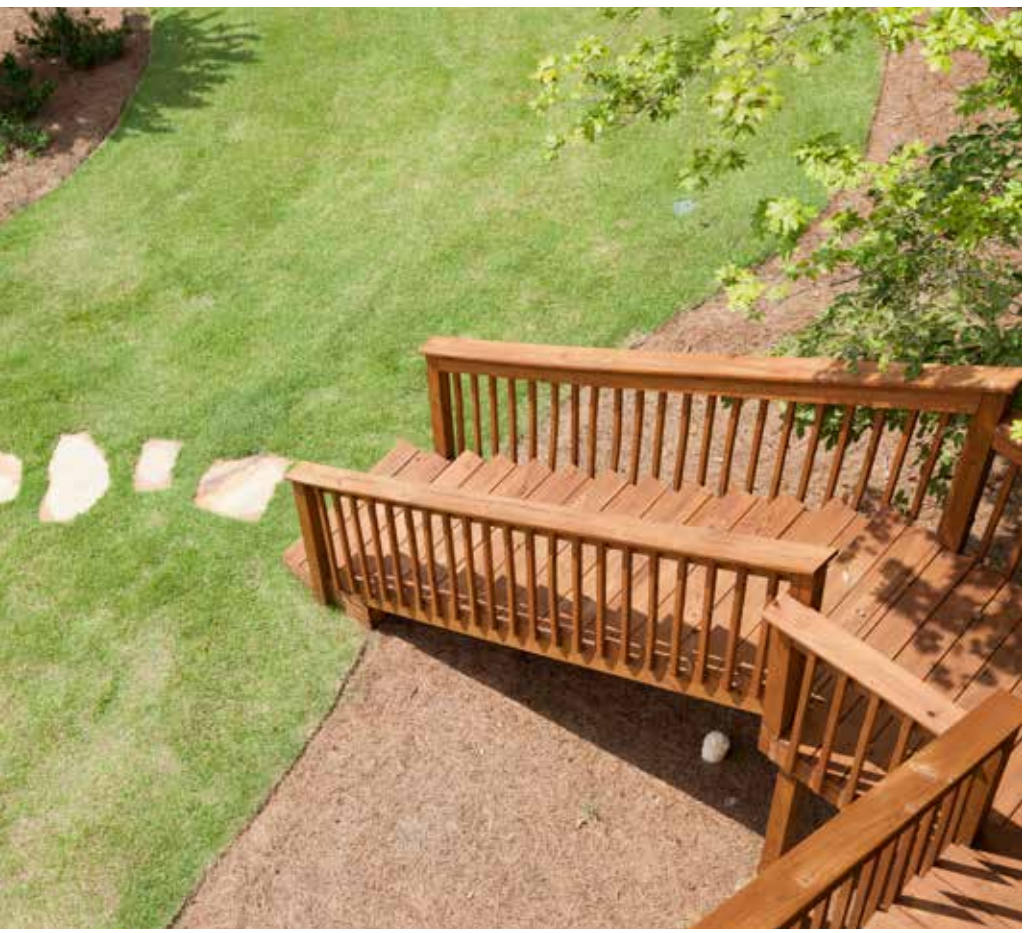
Decks with more than 20 square feet of walking surface should have an electrical outlet to prevent use of indoor extension cords.

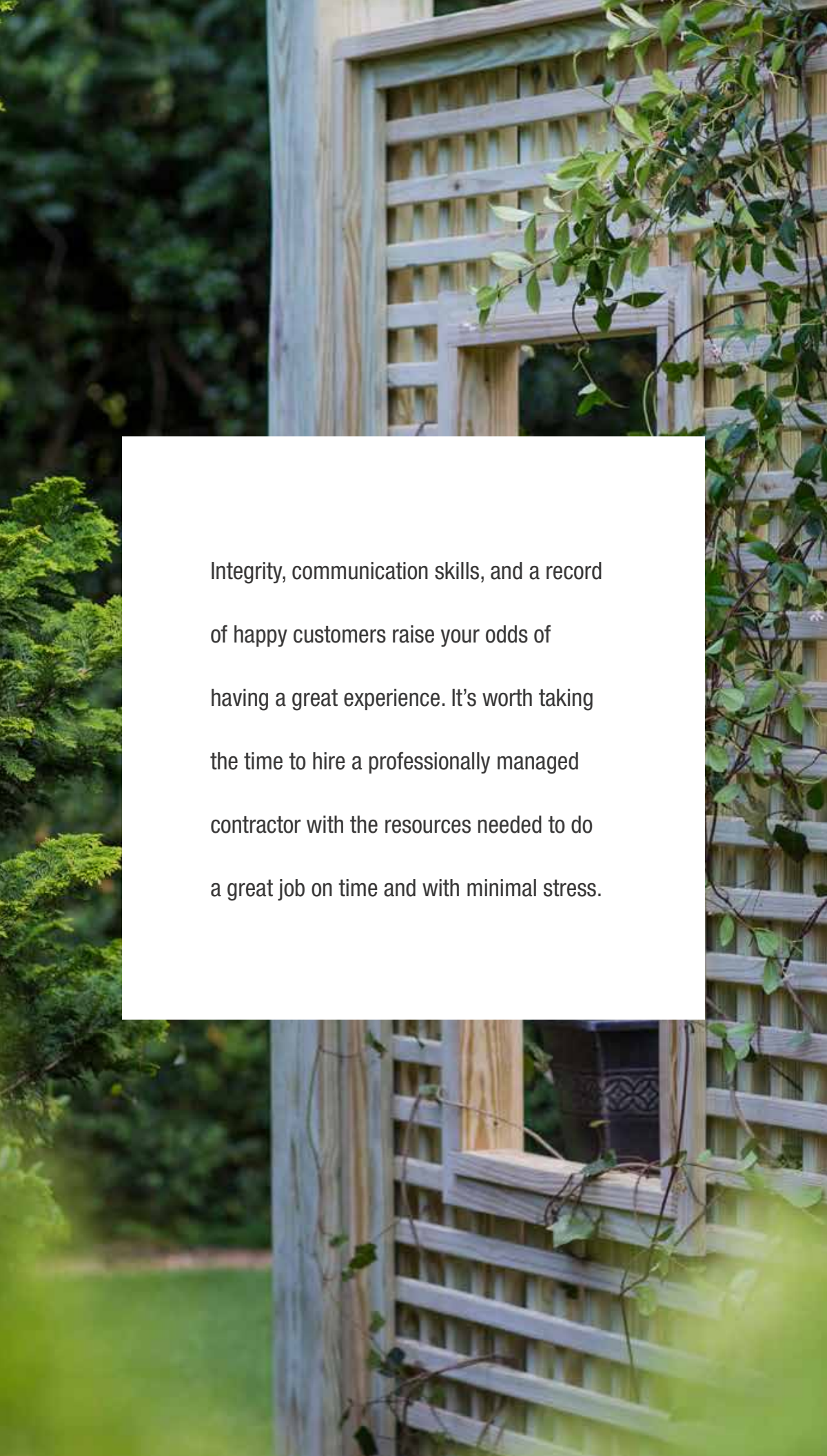
BEYOND THE CODE

Building to a Higher Standard

It's important contractors use pressure treated pine rated for Ground Contact, which has a higher level of preservative treatment than lumber rated for Above Ground use. (A label affixed to the end of each piece of lumber clearly specifies the use.) Although Ground Contact isn't specified in the code yet (though it's under consideration), some building inspectors require it. Its treatment level makes it better able to stand up to long-term contact with soil, but also makes it the best choice for above-ground framing.

Although the code may occasionally change, just remember that standards ensure a safe and durable structure. More importantly, quality-conscious contractors appreciate these standards. They rely on them the same way an airline pilot relies on a preflight checklist.





Integrity, communication skills, and a record of happy customers raise your odds of having a great experience. It's worth taking the time to hire a professionally managed contractor with the resources needed to do a great job on time and with minimal stress.

Capture your dreams in
pressure treated pine.

STREAMLINE THE DECK PLANNING PROCESS

A deck planning checklist helps you think it all through.

HAVE AN IDEA

The best contractors and designers guide homeowners through a detailed interview to help them flesh out their backyard ideas. As with any interview, you will be happier with the outcome if you prepare beforehand. Give these basic questions some consideration:

Every great backyard was once just an idea.

Who will build it?

If you haven't already hired a great contractor, here's how to start.

Why are you building it?

This answer will impact the deck's size, design, materials, and budget. You may need lots of space to grill and entertain, just enough room to sunbathe, or an amenity to attract potential buyers.

How exactly will you use it?

You might eventually add heavy weight to the deck like a hot tub, for example. The contractor will need to engineer it to carry the extra load. If you want a place for children and pets during warm weather, the railing will need to be designed accordingly.

Where will you put it?

Although most decks are at the back of the house, you might locate it to take advantage of a view.

What will it look like?

The deck's architecture should complement the house rather than fight it.

How much will you spend?

The budget will determine the deck's size, design, and materials. If you estimate your costs up front, your plans and specifications will be much more detailed and accurate. Get as much as possible in writing and be wary of contractors who only use one-page cost proposals.

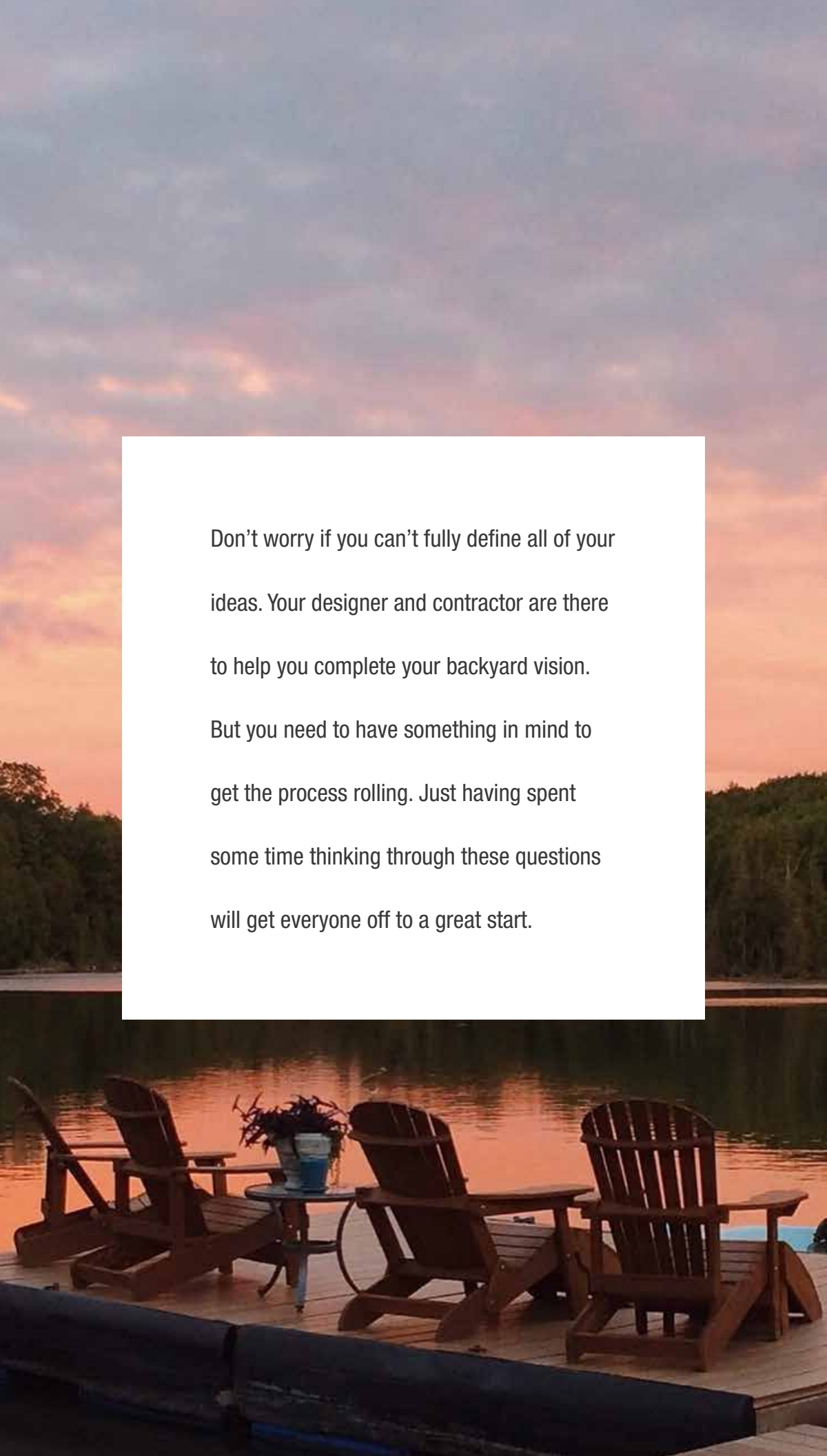
How will you access it?

If the deck will include a set of stairs, the ideal location is in the natural traffic pattern. Stairs should also be well lighted. If you will mostly access the deck from the house, stairs can be added later on.

What products will you use?

There are seemingly endless choices when it comes to decking and railing. A few things to consider:

- Ground contact treated wood is a must for framing. But it shouldn't be limited to just that.
- Synthetic decking can cost twice as much and get excessively hot to the touch in the summer sun. A high-end treated product like MasterDeck™ brand pressure treated decking is an attractive and durable surface that won't burn your feet or pocketbook.
- There are lots of choices for railing systems. How you'll use the deck will help you choose. For crib decks, a traditional guardrail with closely spaced wood spindles might be the best choice. A cable rail system on a second-floor deck can seem nearly invisible.

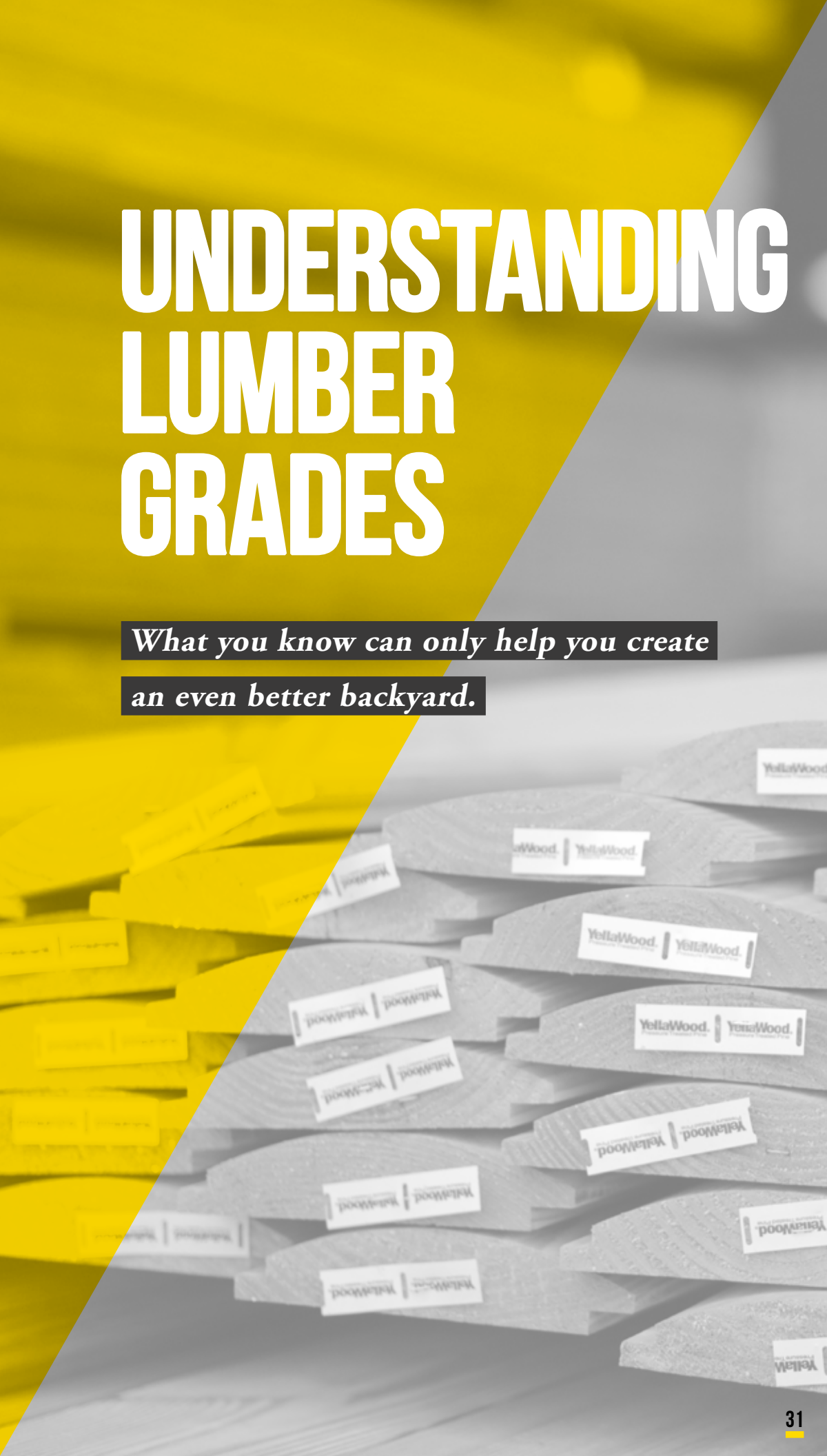


Don’t worry if you can’t fully define all of your ideas. Your designer and contractor are there to help you complete your backyard vision. But you need to have something in mind to get the process rolling. Just having spent some time thinking through these questions will get everyone off to a great start.

Because the eyes eat first.
And relax first, too.

UNDERSTANDING LUMBER GRADES

What you know can only help you create an even better backyard.



REMEMBER... NOTHING GREAT COMES *THAT* EASY

While creating the ultimate backyard is a rewarding and fun experience, it's not without its frustrations. It can sometimes be difficult communicating your vision to your contractor or designer even with visual references. Learning a little about wood grades can go a very long way to establishing appropriate expectations, minimizing miscommunications, and eliminating potential frustrations.

MAKING THE GRADE

Perhaps the number one thing homeowners need to understand is that lumber grades are not assigned by the treater. They're graded at the sawmill where the logs are cut. And the focus of these grades is primarily on the strength of the board. That's it. So it's not surprising that something is lost in translation from the sawmill to the backyard when it comes to homeowners' expectations.

BREAKING IT DOWN

The easiest way to think of lumber grades is to think of three different tiers of quality: Good, Better, and Best. These tiers will not only help you judge the strength of your decking materials, but also level-set your expectations on appearance, maintenance, and performance. Here are a few characteristics of each:

Good

These are usually grades Number 1 and Number 2 and are most commonly carried on local lumberyard racks. They have good strength ratings, but will also come with more imperfections like larger knots, rounded bark edges, and some bowing or slight twisting. Number 1 will have fewer knots than Number 2. These grades are great for the budget-conscious homeowner who doesn't mind the imperfections and appreciates the rustic beauty.

Better

In this tier, you'll find the Prime grade of Number 1 and Number 2. They feature the same strength properties, but the Prime grades provide more emphasis on appearance, namely in regard to the amount of bark on the edges. This category also features a popular product: 5-quarter deck boards. These boards are specifically milled for decking. There's more emphasis on appearance, and they're available in Standard and Premium grades (Premium has fewer, smaller knots).

Best

For homeowners who place a premium on backyard beauty, there's either C (and better) Select Structural grade products. With these two grades you get the best in strength properties as well as a more pleasing appearance. Expect smaller and less frequent knots and almost no bark on the edges. Both of these grades are available in kiln-dried options (KDAT), which eliminates the waiting period to paint or stain commonly needed on "wet" lumber.

Work some backyard wonders.

DO YOU NEED DESIGN HELP?

You probably do.

A design professional can actually reduce costs on a complex deck product.

ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY

Think of the typical residential deck: a flat, rectangular structure with access from the house. Maybe a few stairs, trim boards, and a simple railing. Any good deck builder can build this. But if you want a deck with multiple levels, curves, and other unusual shapes, or if you have a property with a steep slope, you'll want to invest in an architect or a full-service design-build company.

MUCH BETTER BACKYARDING

Because most homeowners are spending more time in their backyards, they want a complete outdoor experience rather than just a deck or patio. These types of complex backyard projects are becoming more common than ever. More and more builds include patios connected to decks and pools, screened-in porches, and outdoor kitchens.

SOLVING CHALLENGES

If you want one of those impressive decks or outdoor kitchens, a design pro brings an eye for visually harmonizing it with the house and landscape. They also know how to tailor the design to your lifestyle. "An architect will focus on what will function best for the client," says Philadelphia-area architect Peter Phillips. For example, when designing a deck next to a kitchen, he lowered the window sills to create a visual connection with the deck, and flanked the deck with a stone wall that matched the home's stone siding.

ANTICIPATING CHANGES

The design pro can also solve difficult structural problems and even plan for additions. If you want to eventually convert the deck into a porch, the structure needs to be engineered to support a roof. Structural analysis also earns its keep on a multi-level deck. A typical builder will support those different levels with extra posts, which can look awfully busy and might even block a view. A good design-build company will have a library of proven ways to value-engineer the deck with fewer posts without sacrificing any strength.

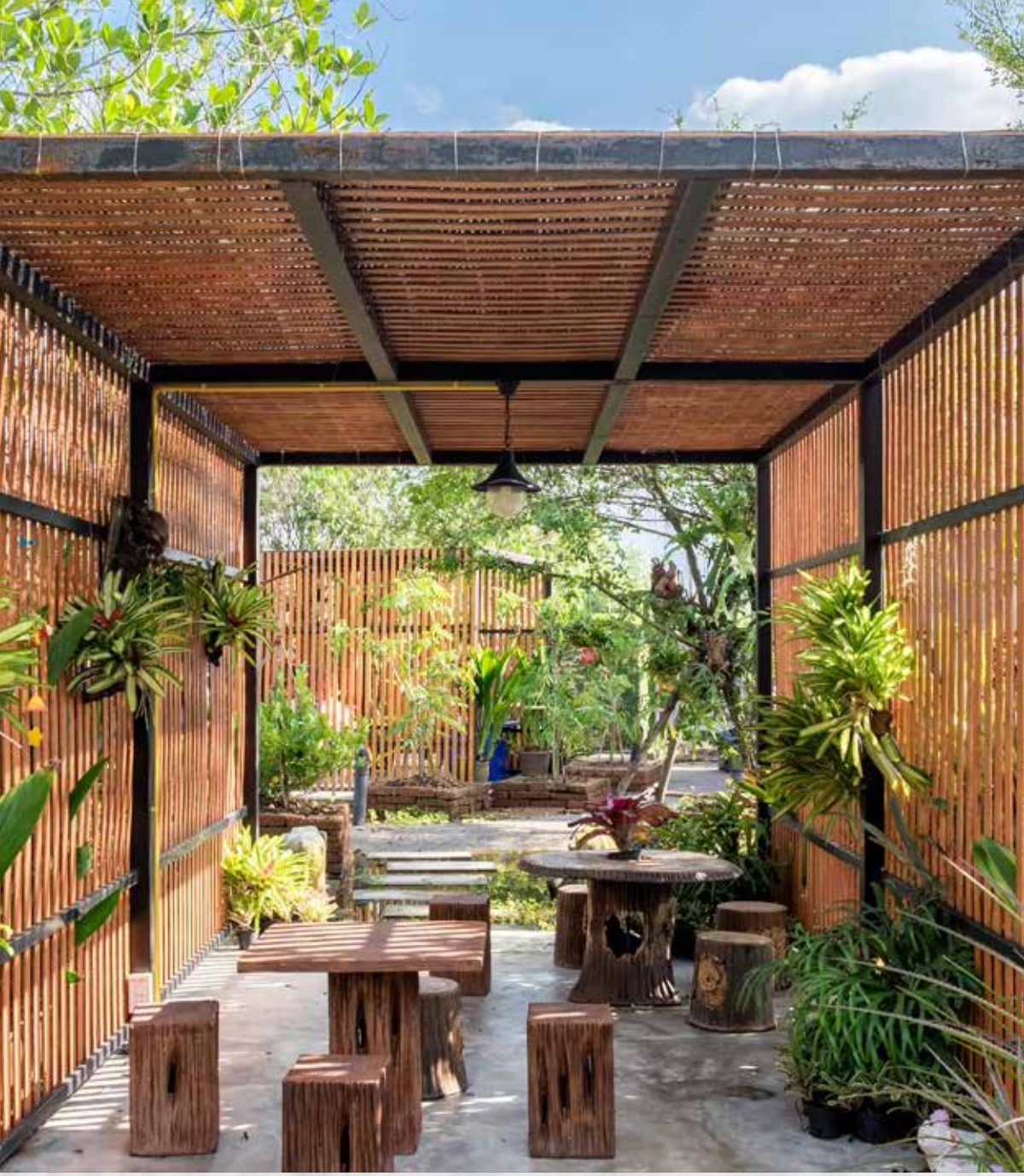
DECIDING WHO TO CALL

If you need design help, you still need to decide what kind of company to work with. The answer will depend on whose process you prefer. Some architects charge by the hour or by the square foot, depending on the job, while others charge a percentage of construction costs, with 15% being typical. By contrast, the design-build firm usually quotes a single price for designing and building the deck. Some homeowners prefer to keep designer and builder separate, while others want everything done by one company to eliminate potential conflicts.

Start off on the right work boot.

YOUR FINAL VISION

Regardless of who you choose, expect to spend an hour or two on-site with them going through a detailed questionnaire. This will include your style preferences, intended deck uses, and whether you're aware of any issues like a septic system or underground wiring or gas lines. The designer will then use computer software to create a design and a 3D rendering for review and revisions.



EXPERIENCE GOES A LONG WAY

Although hiring a design pro will add cost at the beginning of the project, it can be money well spent. On a complex deck, an experienced designer can minimize mistakes and construction delays and make things go more smoothly with the building inspector. In the end, it can actually save you money.

You don't need a deed to own the neighborhood.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN BUILDING

Minimizing surprises is the key to a better backyard building experience.

KNOWING THE PROCESS

Whether you're building a fence, a backyard gazebo, or an outdoor kitchen, it's important to understand that it's not just a physical process. Half of it is mental. Knowing it's a journey to the final backyard vision will help you be prepared.

Take the example of a new deck. After finishing the design, your contractor will apply for a building permit. Once the permit has been granted, holes for post footings will need to be dug, concrete placed in them, the posts and frame erected, and the decking, railings, and trim installed. Most of these steps include sub-steps, the number of which varies according to the project's size and complexity. The local building official will also need to inspect the work during this process.

TALK IT OVER

To avoid surprises, it's important to talk through these steps with the contractor. Washington, DC-area builder David Lupberger learned that lesson on the first day of a 2600-square-foot deck project. The homeowner returned after work and gasped in shock at the holes dug in the yard for post footings. "To the client, it looked like an artillery range," said Lupberger. Now he makes sure that homeowners know exactly what is going to happen next.

Taste is never bought. It's built.

SPEAK UP

If the contractor doesn't take the lead in this type of communication, then you need to do so. "It's perfectly reasonable to ask for a schedule and a regular progress meeting to go over the next steps in the project and to ask questions," says Lupberger. A professional contractor will be happy to accommodate that request and will understand that clear communication benefits everyone.

> ***“It’s perfectly reasonable to ask for a schedule and a regular progress meeting.”***

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

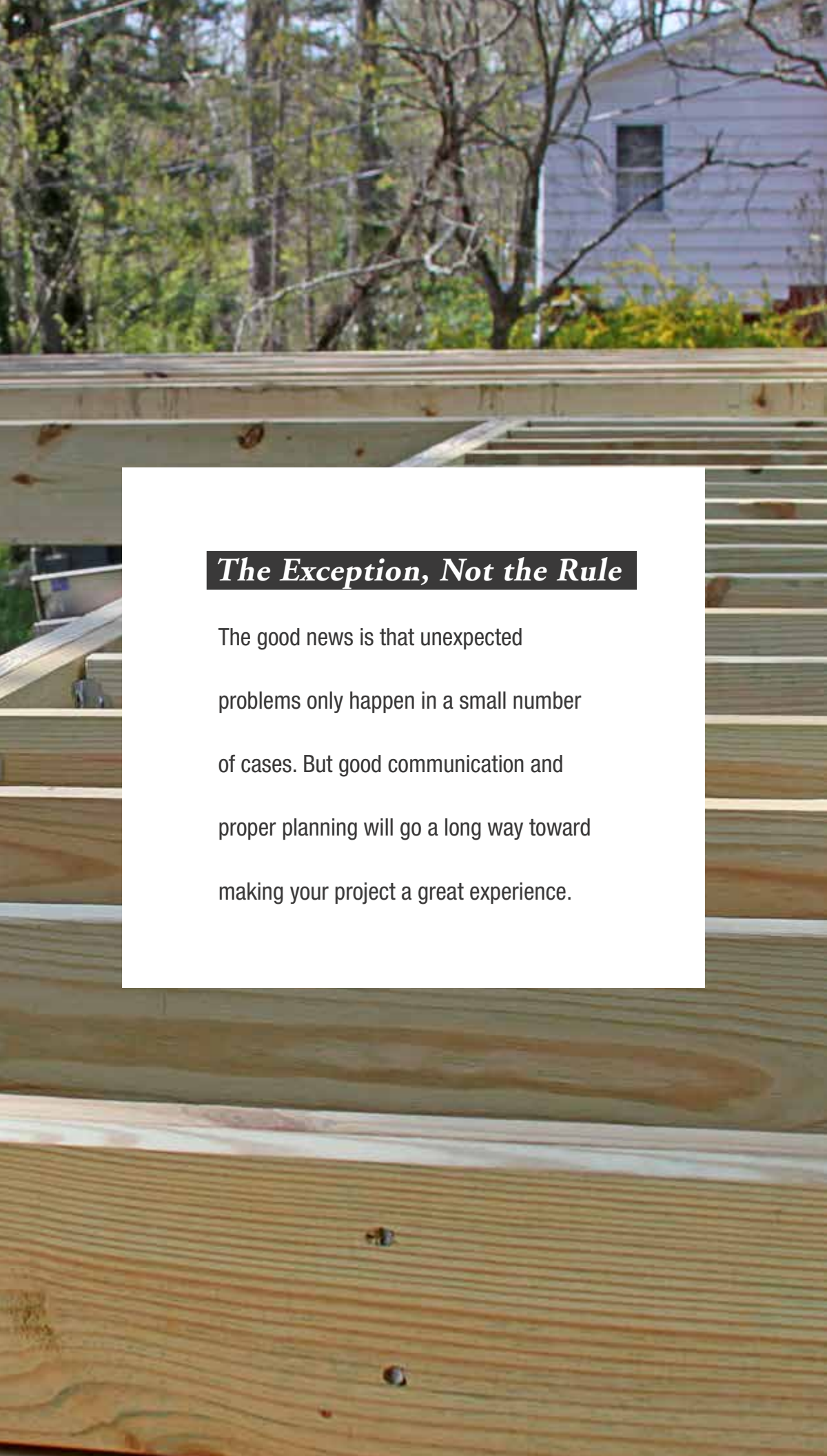
Chances are the project will follow the plan you and your contractor have discussed. But it's impossible to foresee all potential problems. When replacing an old deck, if the original ledger (the connection between the deck and the house) wasn't properly flashed, that raises the chance of rot in the walls. Those walls will need to be repaired. Or if the contractor will be anchoring the rafters of a new arbor to an old roof, that requires weaving new shingles in with the old. If the old shingles are too brittle, it may be necessary to replace more shingles than the quantity in the original proposal. In extreme cases, the shingles might be so brittle that the entire roof needs replacing. If you know what the possibilities are, you will be prepared if they materialize and pleasantly surprised if they don't.

UNCOVERING THE UNPREDICTABLE

Be aware that some problems aren't so easy to spot. You may add a deck to a blank wall that looks and feels solid, only to discover during the build that the wall framing has been rotting because of an unknown roof leak. Or the contractor may take every possible precaution regarding underground obstacles, including asking local utilities to mark the locations of gas, electric, and water lines, only to run into something that wasn't marked. And while it's extremely rare, finding a sinkhole has happened.

SAFETY NET

Most homeowners are grateful when a contractor finds these problems, but the extra expense can stretch a tight budget. That's why a lot of contractors suggest that homeowners have a 15% cash reserve over and above the contract amount.



The Exception, Not the Rule

The good news is that unexpected problems only happen in a small number of cases. But good communication and proper planning will go a long way toward making your project a great experience.

Milk the backyard for all the relaxation it's worth.

A GREAT FENCE

For a fence that's still good-looking and solid a decade from now, consider these details.

DEFINING YOUR BOUNDARIES

A great fence is one that does the job you want and stands the test of time. It's beautifully designed, complements the home, and remains straight and solid for years and years after it's installed. The secret to getting such a fence lies in the following details.

Ensure solid grounding.

Setting posts in concrete footings secures them firmly in place. It's good practice to extend each footing above ground and to taper the top (like a cone). The taper will ensure that water drains away from the posts. Concrete is crucial beneath large double gates because the leverage imposed by the gates on the posts can pull their tops toward the middle, causing the gates to bind.

Insist on high-quality lumber.

"With good design and attention to detail, treated Southern pine makes a long-lasting and attractive fence," says Ambler, Penn. contractor Mark Clement. "It's also visually and physically substantial." High-quality treated wood has a natural beauty that requires no coating, but it can also be stained or painted to match the home.

Seal all end cuts.

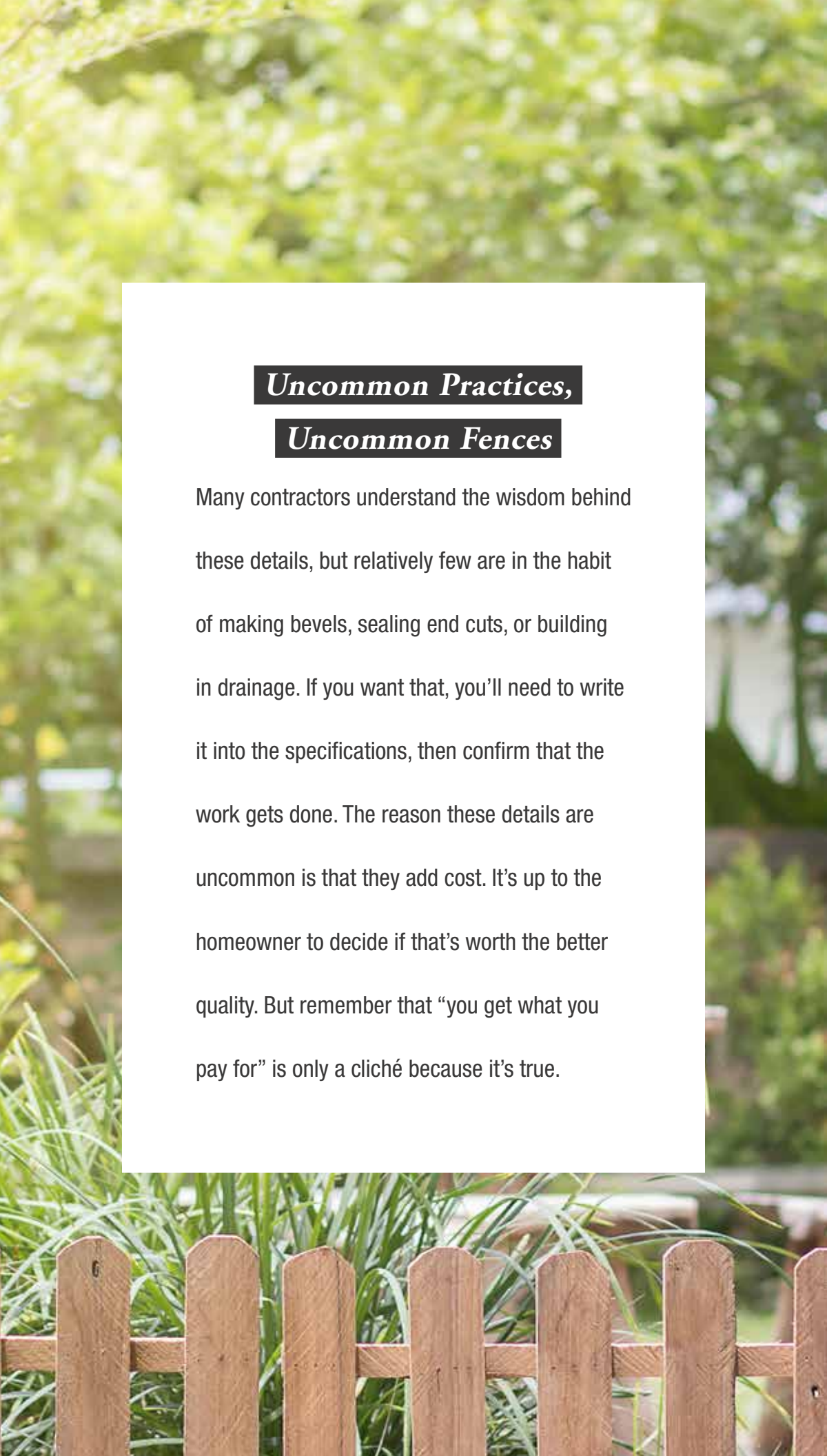
If you look at the end of a board under a microscope, it looks like a bundle of drinking straws. So it's no surprise that's where water will most likely be sucked into the grain. Sealing field cuts with a copper naphthenate preservative is always a good idea. Monroe, LA contractor Mike Davis, a restoration specialist with 30 years' experience, goes a step further and seals the end of every board in each fence.

Bevel all horizontal surfaces.

Many fences include copper-clad post caps but if you're not using caps, it's a good idea to cut the post top so that it sheds water. Less common but also very helpful is to bevel the tops of all the rails—top, middle, bottom—for the same reason.

Build in drainage.

This is a detail very few fence builders even know about. Installing a drainage mat wherever two boards are sandwiched together goes a long way toward reducing the chance of rot. Use a landscape reinforcement fabric stapled to the back of the horizontal runner. The mat compresses tightly enough to permit a secure connection between the two boards while leaving just enough gap for the board to dry out.



Uncommon Practices, Uncommon Fences

Many contractors understand the wisdom behind these details, but relatively few are in the habit of making bevels, sealing end cuts, or building in drainage. If you want that, you'll need to write it into the specifications, then confirm that the work gets done. The reason these details are uncommon is that they add cost. It's up to the homeowner to decide if that's worth the better quality. But remember that "you get what you pay for" is only a cliché because it's true.

Happy places aren't found.
They're built.

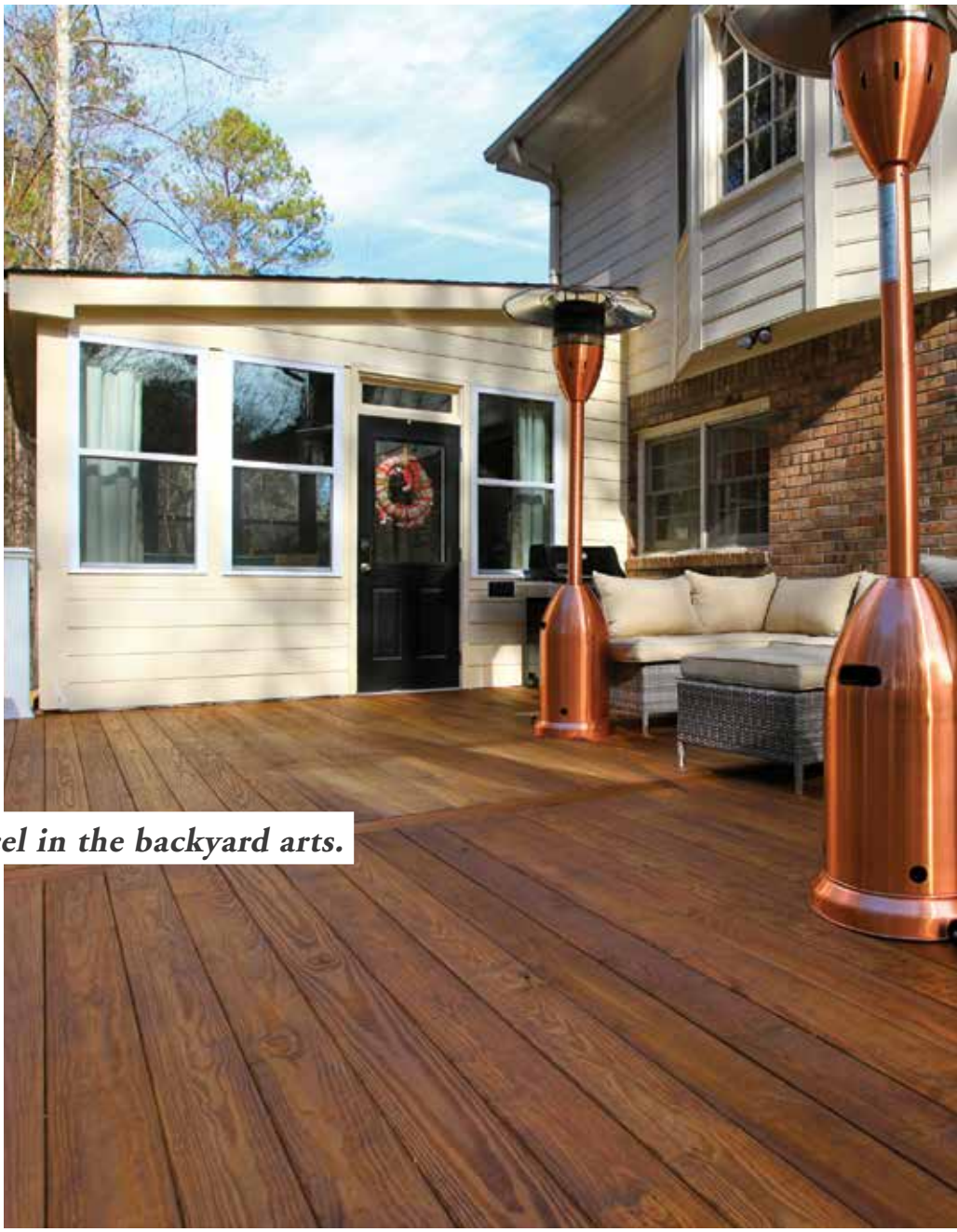
THE ALL-SEASON DECK

Get even more out of your outdoor space.

No matter what the forecast.

YEAR-ROUND ENJOYMENT

Decks and patios evoke warm, sunny thoughts. But many people want to extend their backyard living beyond the summer. Roofs, arbors, and awnings provide both shade and cover from the rain, while new waterproofing systems let you turn the area below a tall deck into a sheltered oasis. There are many ways to make your backyard comfortable for all seasons. Here are some options...



Excel in the backyard arts.

A BACKYARD ROOM

Protection

Building a roof over your deck or patio creates a ceiling for hanging a paddle fan, and you can frame the perimeter for enclosure with insect screens. If it's a framed deck, make sure to also lay insect screening over the framing before installing the decking. This will prevent insects getting in from below.

All-Season

If you want a three- or four-season outdoor room, the options are limited only by your budget and imagination. A gas fireplace provides a warm amenity, while window options include folding windows to aluminum-framed screens to storm windows that can be swapped out by season. Expect prices for a basic 12 x 16-foot outdoor room to start at around $20,000.

ARBORS AND PERGOLAS

If an outdoor room is beyond your budget, opt for an arbor or pergola (two names for the same thing). Because arbors can be freestanding or attached, they offer a wider range of backyard use. Remember that while an arbor defines a space and can look great, it offers no rain protection and only minimal shade. Some people create additional shade with vines or by hanging decorative fabrics. They even create shade and rain cover by sloping the rafters and covering with corrugated panels.

AWNINGS

Of all the options for shade and rain cover, the simplest choice is a retractable deck awning. A drop-arm model—with metal brackets that pivot down from the wall, pulling the awing fabric with them—should cost $1,000 to $2,000, depending on size and whether you want a motor. Another option is a folding-arm awning, whose arms fold straight out from the wall, which can cost as much as a mid-range drop arm. For an extra $1,000, you can also get a motion sensor that retracts the awning on windy days.

DRY BELOW

An increasingly popular option is to waterproof the area beneath a tall deck. This makes a lot of sense when a walkout basement opens to that space. Waterproofing requires drainage beneath the decking that directs water to a downspout, usually installed on the farthest edge from the house. About a dozen companies now offer cost-effective, easy-to-install prefabricated systems.

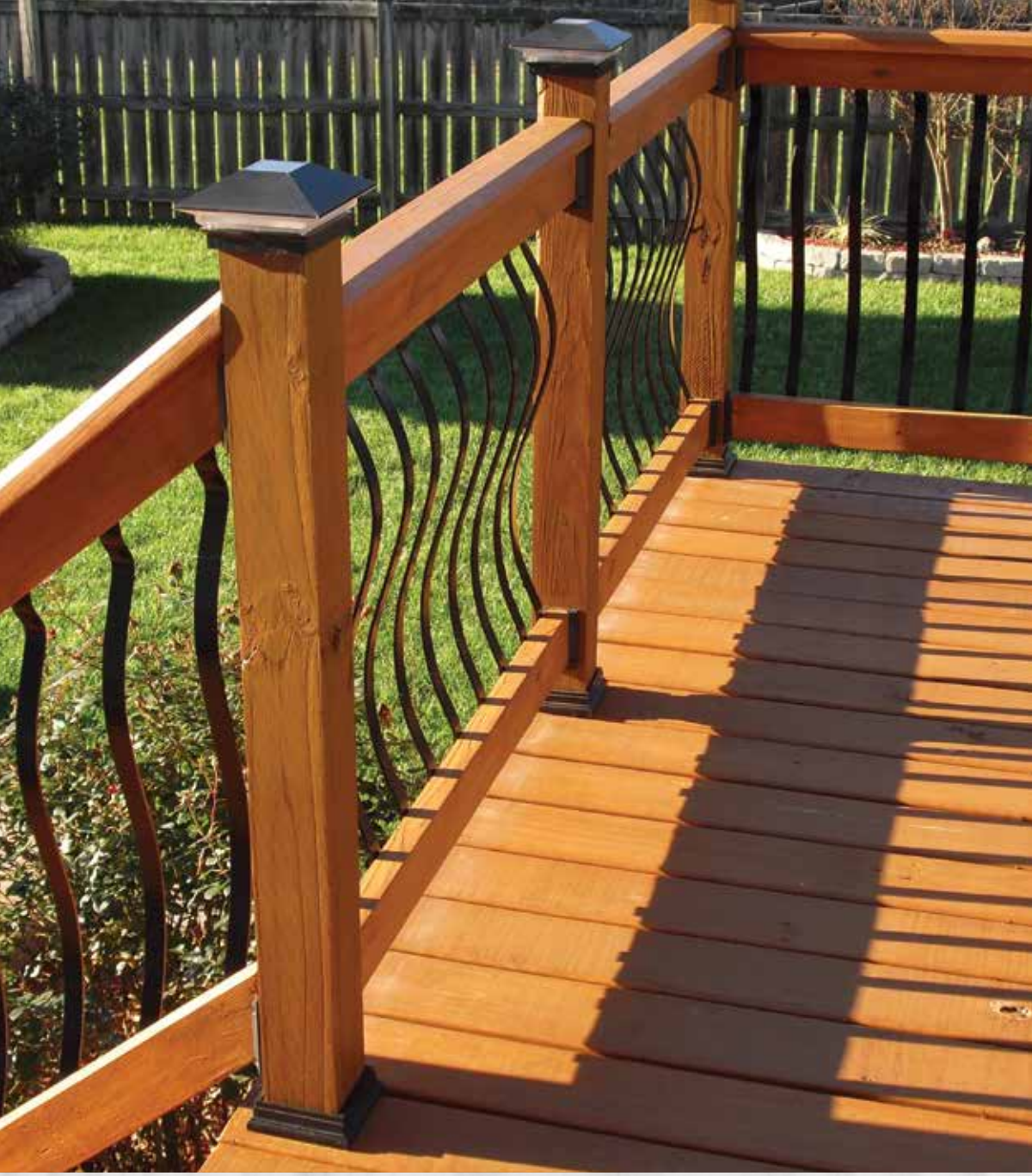
Prefab systems come in two broad types. The first consists of pre-cut membrane pieces that are draped over the joists. The second type consists of metal or vinyl ceiling panels hung on the underside of the joists. Regardless of the option, you can create a sheltered space for sitting, dining, or grilling for roughly one-third the cost. Once word gets out, chances are we'll be seeing more of these.

Deck.

The cure for the common backyard.

THE FINISHING TOUCH

A well-designed railing system can turn a good deck into a great one.



THE NEXT LEVEL

A great railing transforms even the simplest wood deck into something memorable. But most people aren't aware of the sheer number of choices in railing products and designs. There's an almost baffling array to choose from.

BASIC OVERVIEW

Railings can be built or bought. Your contractor can either build a railing system on-site or purchase a manufactured system to install. More homeowners than not opt for site-built wood railings, which account for about 71 percent of the market. It usually comes down to cost: it's easy to spend $30 per foot for a railing system, while a basic wood railing can be built for as little as $10.

Railings On The Rise

More homeowners are choosing railing systems than ever, thanks to low maintenance, strong product warranties, lots of style choices, and ease of installation. In some areas, site-built railings have actually become rare. "Of the more than 100 decks we build each year, we might do five that have wood railings," Says Matt Breyer of Breyer Construction and Landscape, in Reading, PA. Even building inspectors prefer manufactured systems because most are certified by independent testing labs to meet building codes.

Mix and Match

Railings aren't an either-or choice—a skilled contractor can build an attractive, code-compliant hybrid. Most hybrid railings combine wood posts and handrails with low-maintenance, manufactured infill pieces like metal balusters, glass panels, or stainless steel cable rail. "We've built decks that mixed four different types of products in three different colors," says Dave Lombardo, owner of American Deck & Patio in Baltimore, MD.

Keeping It Simple

While design pros can help homeowners sort through the overwhelming number of product options, manufacturers are also simplifying the selection process. Fortress Railing, which makes aluminum, cable, glass-panel, and iron railings, has organized its marketing materials to walk customers through the selection process.

“Don’t let the volume of choice prevent you from getting the perfect railing.”

Endless Variety

Making the selection process easier is great for DIYers, but it also benefits homeowners working with a designer. The products displayed in the showroom represent just a fraction of what's available because dealers are relying more and more on special orders. Designers can bridge the gap between the options on display and the wide variety of design choices actually available.

Standing Out

There are more than enough attractive railing products to choose from. So if you want something special, you will need to spend a bit more time on your choice. But that's no different than any custom build. Don't let the volume of choice prevent you from getting the perfect railing for your deck. It's worth the effort.

Set the neighborhood abuzz.

LIGHTS DONE RIGHT

A skilled outdoor lighting designer can transform your landscape into a nighttime work of art.

THE ONE FOR THE JOB

Who you use all depends on your needs. If you just want to light the deck steps or use the grill in the evening, then an electrician is probably the right call. For something more creative, however, an outdoor lighting designer can be a good investment. The best designers can transform a property into a nighttime work of art.

Hiding Light

The most important thing a good designer brings is the ability to create a lighting scheme that doesn't call attention to itself. "When we do a nice job, people don't notice the lighting," says Brook Tafel of Outdoor Lighting Perspectives (OLP). When highlighting a tree, you shouldn't notice where it comes from. And fixtures should also be unobtrusive during the day, which is why brass and copper are preferred. They develop a surface patina that helps blend in with the landscape.

Big Picture

Pros know how to blend multiple light sources into a coherent whole with an understated feel. This usually means arranging various sources to highlight some areas without creating dark shadows or excessively bright spots. "The effect is the difference between turning on all the lights in the dining room and having a candlelight dinner," says Tafel.

Setting a Tone

The designer will also have some tricks and techniques to enhance your backyard living experience. These might mean wiring the underwater pool light to a dimmer (so you can turn it up when people are swimming, then turn it down to a subtle glow when you simply want to relax on the deck) or extending the backyard lighting beyond the patio to create a sense of depth.

Looks and Performance

While aesthetics are important, safety should be a big part of any lighting design. The spots where it's needed can be surprising. "The transition from driveway to walkway might not have a step, but people will be looking for one at night," says Bob Lyons with OLP. Before you buy, get a sense of how the lighting will look at night. Almost all designers will have demo kits they bring to the house after dark, so the homeowners can see different combinations of light before deciding.

Not all Zen gardens have to be gardens.

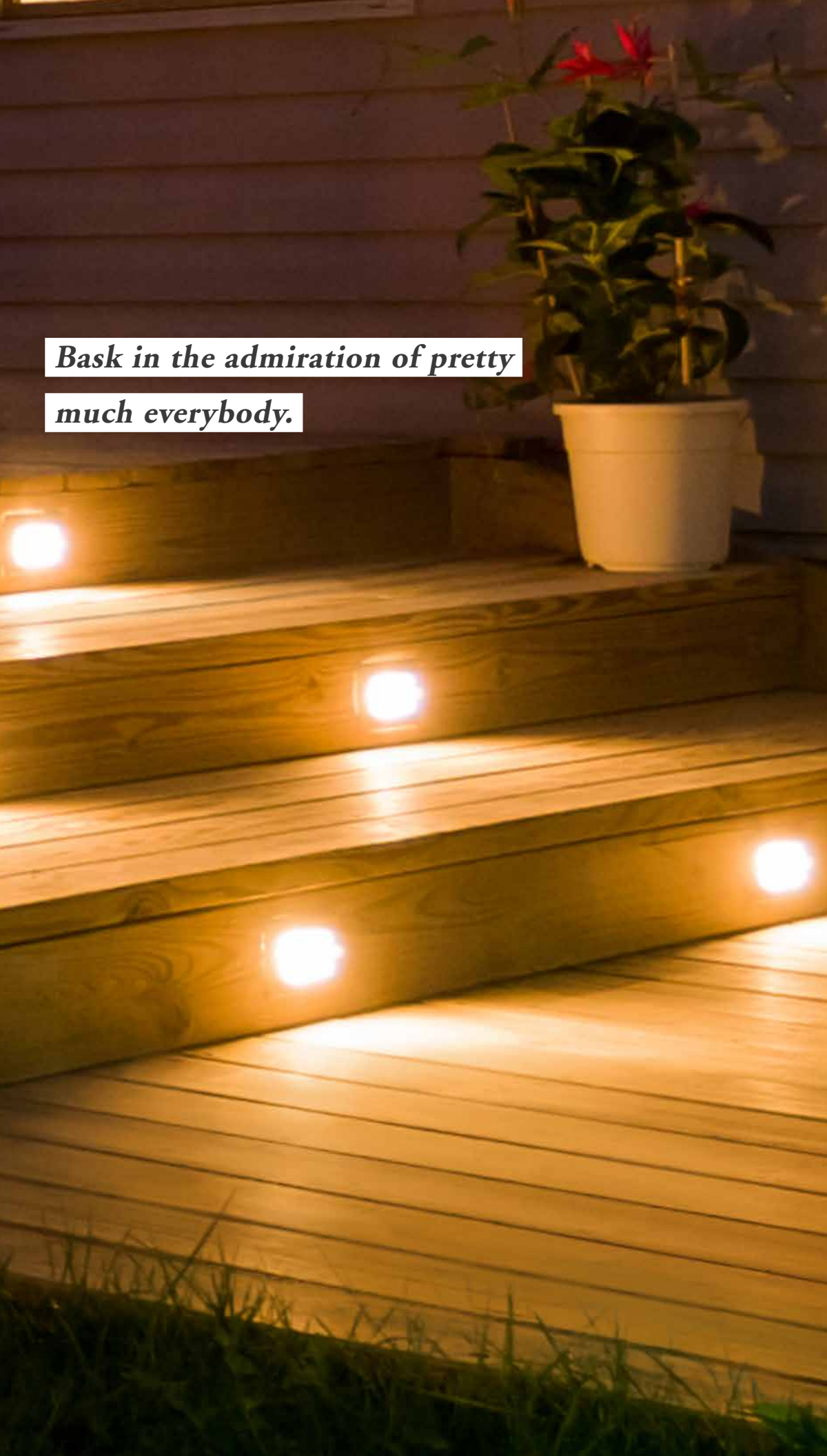
PLANNING AHEAD

If you're planning a new outdoor project, try to get the lighting designer involved before you start building. They can make suggestions that provide options and savings. For example:

- Suggesting wire chase placements on a new deck, so you don't end up with an exposed conduit on the finished project.
- Installing a conduit underneath a hardscape (a patio, walkway, or stone wall) during construction, so it's easier and significantly cheaper to get wire from one side to another.
- Buying all of the same fixtures in the first stage of a multi-stage project to ensure they're not dropped from the catalog in between stages.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

There are nearly endless possibilities for outdoor lighting, so it can be difficult to budget for. While cost depends on your goals and the sources needed to meet them, a good starting point is to price a comprehensive lighting scheme. For $2,500 to $3,000 you should be able to light the backyard of the average home but not the front yard. If you want spectacular lighting across the entire property, a common rule of thumb is one percent of the home's value.


Bask in the admiration of pretty much everybody.

CHOOSING OUTDOOR FURNITURE

It goes beyond quality materials that stand up to the weather.

YOUR RELAXATION STYLE

At the core, it's simple. Furniture and decor make a house a home, and a backyard into an oasis of relaxation. Exactly how you want to relax is the real question. Meals on the deck? Dining table. Sipping drinks by the pool? Loungers. Nights by a fire pit? Benches. Or all of the above.

MATERIAL ISSUES

Once you decide how to use your outdoor space, then decide what materials are right for the job. Choosing furniture materials is actually an important part of the decision-making process. Each has its own pros and cons. Missy Henriksen of the National Association of Landscape Professionals offers this perspective...

Natural Wood

Strong and durable with a reputation for high quality. Make it a point to look for tight-fitting joints and bolts. (Bolts hold together longer outdoors than glue.) Finishes and surfaces should feel smooth and free of flaws, including on the underside of a tabletop. Denser wood soaks up less water and requires less TLC over time, but plan on an annual recoating with preservative no matter what.

Rattan and Wicker

The informal look of these materials is fun, but the materials themselves have higher maintenance requirements. Look for wicker that fits tightly on the frame. Avoid anything that's unraveling or loosely wound. To keep rain and dirt from wearing down the woven structure, vacuum regularly and wash with an oil soap made for wood furniture. Re-coat with a finish every few years.

“Exactly how you want to relax is the real question.”

Steel and Wrought Iron

People like iron and steel for the design and decorative scrollwork. The weight of these materials makes them great choices for windy areas, but they're best used for stationary pieces. Even with a completely painted piece, it won't take long before rust spots show up on steel left out in the elements. These should be sanded down to bare metal and re-coated with a metal paint. Pieces with powder-coated finishes will be the most resistant to rust.

Aluminum, Plastic and PVC

These materials eliminate worries about rust and cost less than wood or steel, but their lighter weight means they're more likely to blow around in a high wind.

PROTECT YOUR INVESTMENT

Regardless of material, if you live in a cold climate, the most important thing you can do to make outdoor furniture last is get it out of the weather in the off-season. “No matter how weather-proof the furniture is, you’ll want to store it over the winter to expand its lifespan,” says Henriksen. “Consider the room you have for storage before you make a purchase.”

ACCESSORIZE

Go for it with outdoor cushions, throw pillows, and carpet. Solution-dyed acrylic is a good choice for fabrics as it resists mold and its colors will be less prone to fading under the sun's ultraviolet rays. Carpets should be made specifically for outdoor use and easy to clean with a quick sweep or a spray from the hose.

Brag without uttering a single word.

THE ULTIMATE OUTDOOR KITCHEN

What to do before you call a designer.

THINKING BEYOND THE GRILL

The backyard grilling game has changed. Many homeowners want a full-scale outdoor kitchen with a grill, prep sink, and lots of counter space. Thinking it through ahead of time makes the process go smoother and ensures an outdoor kitchen that's the talk of the neighborhood. John Odom, owner and kitchen designer of Archadeck, suggests asking yourself the following...

Where to put it?

Unless you want a poolside cabana kitchen, place it close to the main house to access the indoor kitchen for prep and cleanup. The work area should be close enough to seating so that the cook can interact with guests, but remain out of the traffic pattern flow.

How big?

Adding a kitchen to an existing deck generally means more limited space than a ground-level kitchen. But kitchen size typically tends to follow this formula: 6 to 8 linear outdoor kitchen feet—including the grill, sink, and counters —usually costs at least $5,000 to $6,000, while a $15,000 budget is better for a 15 to 20 linear foot kitchen. The features and quality of the grill can also affect those numbers.

Counter space?

Try not to skimp on counter space. It has a big impact on the experience. Odom prefers granite counters where budget permits, but says tile also stands up well. Counter height is usually 36 inches—same as indoors—but many people set it at a comfortable height for the cook. If your kitchen includes raised bar seating, note that standard barstool height is 42 inches. Stainless steel cabinets are recommended as wood cabinetry shouldn't be placed next to a hot grill.

“Style points definitely count in the backyard.”

Layout?

How to configure the space is an in-depth discussion. But remember, kitchen designers use the same guidelines for outdoors as indoors. The National Kitchen + Bath Association has summarized them for use as a planning tool.

What kind of grill?

Size the grill for your needs and get the best one you can afford. Better quality stainless steel grills have thicker layers, so it's worth comparing some numbers. "The grill will be outside for its entire life, so this isn't the place to cut corners," says Odom.

Refrigerator or not?

While the outdoor kitchen needs a grill and sink, refrigerators are optional. In fact, Odom advises against them because of potential complications with electrical outlets. Consider a stainless steel cooler recessed into the countertop instead. They're effective and melting ice drains out of a hose.

Want a wall?

Some people surround their outdoor kitchen with a short wall. For ground-level kitchens, this might consist of cinder blocks clad with thin stone veneer. On a deck, you'll need to lighten the load. There may be enough excess weight that your contractor needs to reinforce the framing.

What about cover?

Most outdoor kitchens have some protection overhead, whether a framed roof or a pergola. The choice will depend partly on climate: shaded space for areas with intense summer sun, or solid roof in areas with more rain. Some people also add a commercial propane heater or place the walls to block prevailing winds.

Maximizing your investment.

Style points definitely count in the backyard. But make sure the balance between form and function is nearly perfect. Given the time and money you'll spend creating the ideal outdoor kitchen, it's worth really thinking it through.

High notes aren't just for endings.

CHOOSING OUTDOOR SOUND & VIDEO

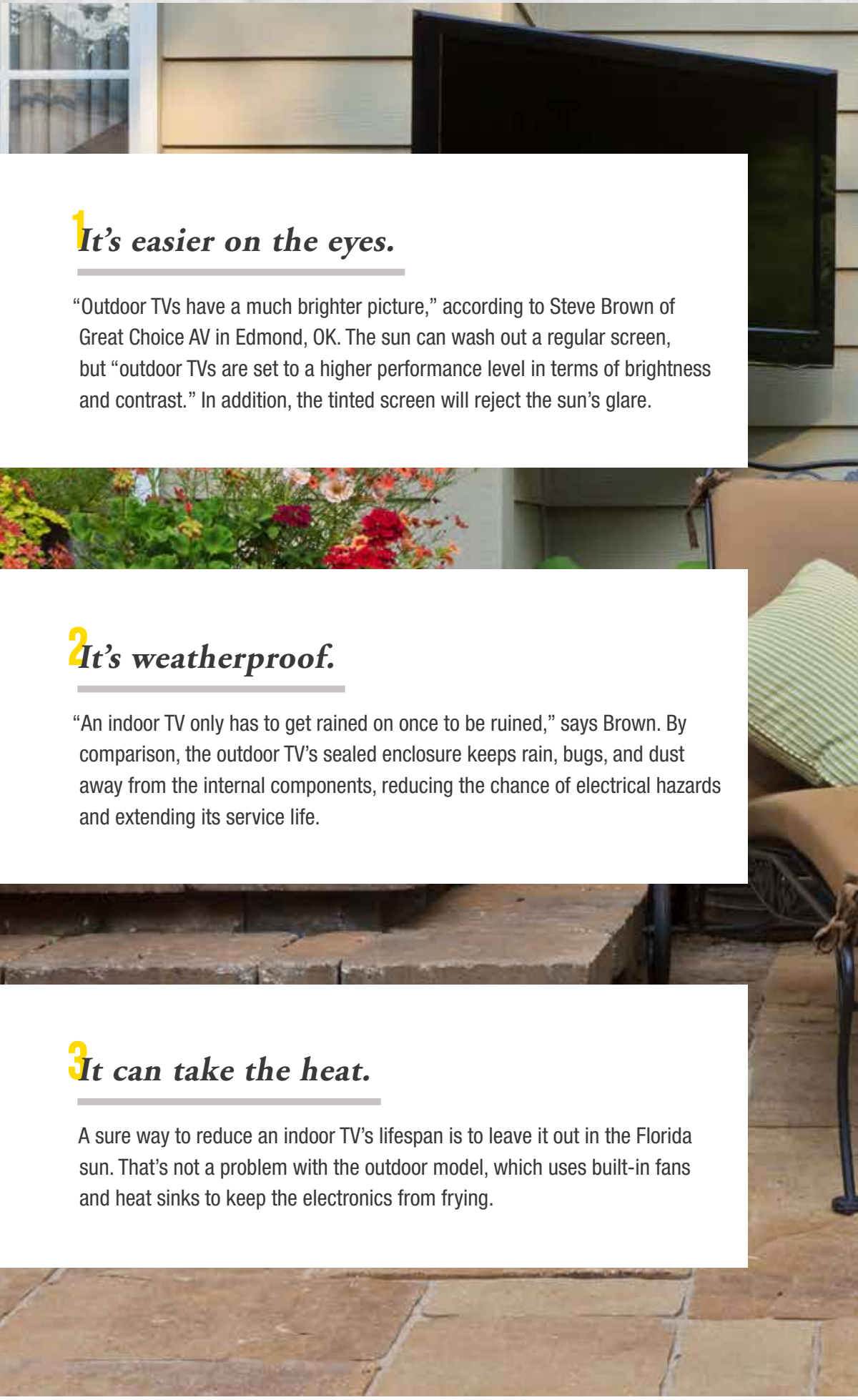
The right type of electronic equipment will provide a memorable outdoor experience.

ADD SOME JUICE

A little electricity makes any event more lively and elevates your deck or patio to epic proportions. For an unforgettable backyard gathering, you need lighting, a television, and some stereo speakers. You can enjoy music or watch the game while manning the grill. But the moment is only as good as your setup. Here are some tips for choosing the right lighting, video, and audio equipment.

CHOOSING A TELEVISION

Hauling the portable TV outside is fine on occasion. But the screen will be small and won't be viewable during the day. If you entertain regularly, you might want something you don't have to drag in and out. It's no surprise an outdoor television will cost more (a 43 in. LED model will be at least $1,499), but audio/visual (AV) installers say it's money well spent. There are three main reasons...



1 It's easier on the eyes.

"Outdoor TVs have a much brighter picture," according to Steve Brown of Great Choice AV in Edmond, OK. The sun can wash out a regular screen, but "outdoor TVs are set to a higher performance level in terms of brightness and contrast." In addition, the tinted screen will reject the sun's glare.

2 It's weatherproof.

"An indoor TV only has to get rained on once to be ruined," says Brown. By comparison, the outdoor TV's sealed enclosure keeps rain, bugs, and dust away from the internal components, reducing the chance of electrical hazards and extending its service life.

3 It can take the heat.

A sure way to reduce an indoor TV's lifespan is to leave it out in the Florida sun. That's not a problem with the outdoor model, which uses built-in fans and heat sinks to keep the electronics from frying.

ADDITIONAL TV TIPS

If you're hanging the TV on a wall, make sure the mount is rated for the outdoors. And when building a new deck or patio, decide ahead of time where you will locate the TV so your electrician can install an outdoor electrical outlet in that location.

ENTERTAINMENT NECESSITIES

Dim the Lights

When it comes to outdoor entertaining, light intensity can make or break the experience. A lot of homes have eaves- or wall-mounted floodlights, which are harsh and concentrate light in small areas. Wire your outdoor fixtures to a dimmer circuit, so you can turn up the intensity when you need it—to clean up after the party or help someone find dropped keys—then dial it back for ambiance the rest of the time.

Wiring for Sound

A good outdoor sound system includes an indoor receiver and amp, with conduit-encased wiring running to outdoor speakers. An app lets you stream music wirelessly from your phone to the receiver and amp, which then sends it over the wires to the speakers.

Looks Are Important

There are different types of weatherproof outdoor speakers, including models that can be mounted on ceilings, patios, and other surfaces. Some look like garden lights or are shaped like rocks. Sound quality can vary greatly, so it's wise to visit an AV dealer and listen to the sound before making a purchase.

The People Next Door

One last consideration. Many homeowners worry an outdoor sound system will annoy the neighbors. But a professional can configure the speakers so that they focus sound in the entertainment area. This includes using speakers that more accurately represent various frequency ranges. "Full sounding and loud sounding are not the same," Brown says. You can also opt for in-ground subwoofers, which can be buried in the yard or below a deck. They're engineered so that you feel the bass more than you hear it and only within a defined area.

End the neighborhood rivalry once and for all.

LANDSCAPING TRENDS

Research shows homeowners are investing more than ever in their landscapes.

GOING OUTSIDE MORE

Researchers in Houzz.com's annual *Landscape Trends* study contacted nearly 1,000 U.S. homeowners to see exactly how people are transforming their yards. Spending on outdoor projects has increased. "People are buying homes again, and that's giving outdoor projects a big boost," says Nino Sitchinava, Houzz.com's principal economist.

BIG CHANGES

Half of the respondents made major renovations—adding garden beds, upgrading decks, or building new ones—while another 37 percent opted for a complete landscape overhaul. It took an average of five months to plan an overhaul and four months to complete it at a minimum cost of $15,000.

Tap every last bit of your backyard's untapped potential.

MAKING A STATEMENT

Because it's a personal statement, homeowners usually start renovations in front. It's all about curb appeal and differentiating from the neighbors. The landscape features most mentioned were beds, borders, shrubs, and perennials, which surprisingly contradicts realtors' expectations, says Sitchinava. "When homeowners look at curb appeal, they focus just as much on greenery as on the house."

FENCES & PROJECTS MAKE BETTER NEIGHBORS

"A landscaping project is a real icebreaker," adds Sitchinava. Nearly one in five homeowners interacts more with their neighbors after a project—engaging in more small talk, helping one another with outdoor projects, and sharing more drinks or meals.

POPULAR PLANTS

Most people surveyed expressed great interest in low-maintenance plants—up from 67 to 76 percent. Other plants increasing in popularity are native plants and ones that attract birds and bees.

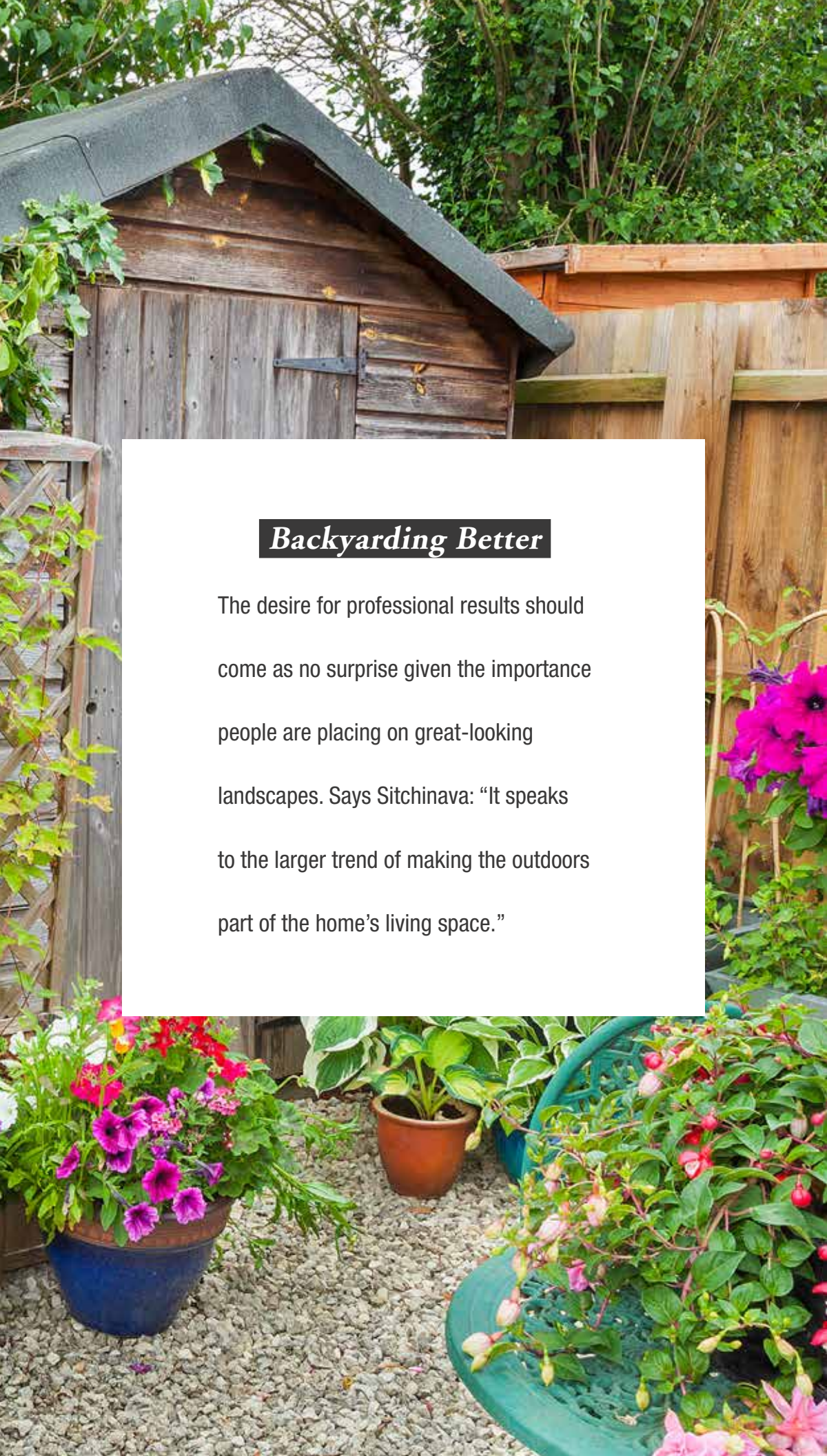
BUILDING CONTINUES

Despite the emphasis on greenery, people continue to invest a lot of time and money into their dream backyard projects. Pressure treated lumber continues to be their number one choice of building material. Top project considerations are:

- *Patios or Terraces*
- *Arbors or Gazebos*
- *Decks*
- *LED Lighting*
- *Outdoor Kitchens*

HIRING PROS

While 63 percent of homeowners initially planned to hire professional contractors, 73 percent ended up doing so once they realized the scope of the work and the skills needed. This included hiring landscape contractors, architects, stone workers, deck builders, and fence builders.



Backyarding Better

The desire for professional results should come as no surprise given the importance people are placing on great-looking landscapes. Says Sitchinava: “It speaks to the larger trend of making the outdoors part of the home’s living space.”

Some "Do Not Disturb" signs don't require a doorknob.

GATHER ROUND THE FIRE

Outdoor fire pits and patios are more popular than ever. But which type is best?

YEAR-ROUND BACKYARDING

When the autumn chill sets in, your enthusiasm for hanging out in the backyard can wane. Adding a fire pit or fireplace completely changes that. The American Society of Landscape Architects named fire pits as the sixth most-requested feature among homeowners doing outdoor projects.

Getting Primal

The act of gathering around a fire is deeply rooted in human history, so it's no surprise that it can actually trigger physiological changes. Sitting by a fire can give you a deep sense of calm. A University of Alabama study found that it lowers most people's blood pressure.

Going Beyond Instinct

For about $100, you run down to the local home center and purchase a small metal pit. But for an ultimate backyard experience, you'll want something more substantial, visually appealing, and permanent. The big questions you need to ask are whether you want a fire pit or fireplace and whether it will burn wood or gas. The answers depend on which social gatherings you enjoy, how much space you have, and what you want to spend.

“Sitting by a fire can give you a deep sense of calm.”

The Pit

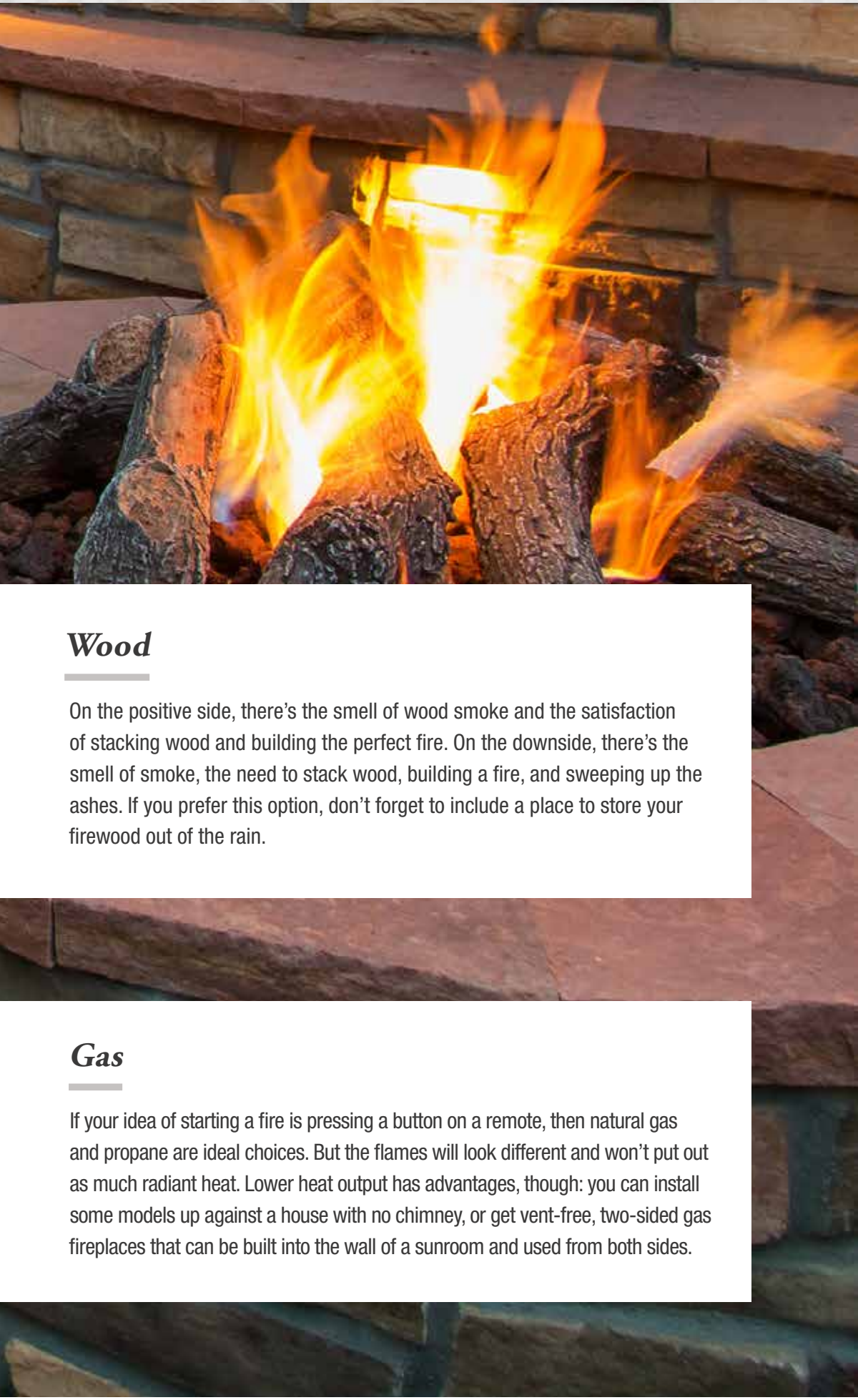
Fire pits are usually easier to install and less costly than a fireplace. With a 360-degree design, they're ideal for entertaining lots of friends and more people can pull up close to the flames. But that circular design means you need enough room for seating all the way around the circumference.

The Place

With a fireplace, fewer people can cozy up to the flames, so it's well suited for more intimate gatherings. The fireplace can also serve as the focal point to visually anchor an outdoor room or covered porch. It makes managing smoke easy and, if you're a pizza aficionado, a fireplace can even be built to include a brick oven.

The Burning Question

The other big question is whether you want to burn wood or gas. This answer may depend on where you live: some localities restrict the use of wood-burning appliances, while others aren't served by gas lines, which could require you to install a large propane tank. If there are no restrictions, consider the appeals of either option.



Wood

On the positive side, there's the smell of wood smoke and the satisfaction of stacking wood and building the perfect fire. On the downside, there's the smell of smoke, the need to stack wood, building a fire, and sweeping up the ashes. If you prefer this option, don't forget to include a place to store your firewood out of the rain.

Gas

If your idea of starting a fire is pressing a button on a remote, then natural gas and propane are ideal choices. But the flames will look different and won't put out as much radiant heat. Lower heat output has advantages, though: you can install some models up against a house with no chimney, or get vent-free, two-sided gas fireplaces that can be built into the wall of a sunroom and used from both sides.

All About the Warmth

Whatever type of fire feature you choose, the rewards include more time enjoying the outdoors and a soothing place to build lasting memories with family and friends.

Sometimes the word stunning
can be so inadequate.

BACKYARD ENTERTAINING

Once you've created a great outdoor space, enjoy it.

HOSTESS WITH THE MOSTESS

Host a Yard Warming

Considerable time, thought, and money went into your new backyard. Naturally, you can't wait to share your backyard wonder with family and friends. Your yard-warming party can be anything from a casual lounging around the fire pit to an elaborate backyard event. No matter what your plans, there are a few things to keep in mind.

Step Up Your Grilling Game

Most outdoor gatherings revolve around good food and drink, which is ideal for showing off both your grilling skills and new outdoor kitchen. Burgers and dogs work for impromptu gatherings, but to truly mark the occasion, consider a selection of quality marinated cuts. For non-meat-eaters, there are grilled pizza and vegetable kebabs. Don't be afraid to involve your guests by inviting them to bring a side dish.

Get People Talking

Never underestimate the power of a few simple icebreakers. Like asking a group to get the fire pit going, so they can strike up conversations while building the fire. Traditional backyard games like bocce, corn hole, and horseshoes are always fun, but don't hold your imagination back. Create simple games with household items. For instance, turn a few upside-down trashcans and a hula hoop into a giant ring toss game.

Keep People Talking

If you want to play music over those outdoor speakers, set the volume low enough so that people can have a conversation without yelling at one another.

Enter Valhalla. Without actually dying.

“Never underestimate the power of a few simple icebreakers.”

Uninvited Guests

If your yard is a bug haven, you will want to take steps to keep them away. Key plants or even a few fans to keep air moving in the eating area can be a big help.

Invitations

Whether your style is a phone call, email, text, or written invitation, the details matter. Let your guests know if it's a sit-down meal or if attire matters. Remind them to bring swimsuits if the party includes pool time. Finally, note the start time, meal serving time (if it's a sit-down), and when the party will be over.

One to Remember

Your yard-warming party is a lot like your dream backyard. The more thought you put into it, the more memorable it will be. Make sure yours will be just as unforgettable as your new backyard.

Unforgettable isn't unobtainable.

Commission greatness.