

Cover Story

Take it outside

An insider's guide to all kinds of outdoor structures

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Special to The Detroit News

In recent years, outdoor structures have become increasingly popular for good reason. From art studios to garden sheds, the possibilities are endless for these special little gems. Here are some tips to consider when planning for architectural features like these on your property.

At the Home Depot, outdoor structures go from playsets and pergolas to sheds and storm shelters. "Most categories include options for full-service assembly or installation, in addition to DIY kits," says Chris Giallanza, merchant, storage buildings and installed structures.

Storage sheds that come in various sizes and materials like wood, plastic or metal, are always in demand. "When you think of outdoor structures, these sheds are probably the first thing that come to mind," he says. Barns, garages, greenhouses, gazebos and carports are among the other selections.

Before you buy an outdoor structure, Giallanza suggests measuring your outdoor space and prioritizing your needs. If you want to sit in the shade, a gazebo or pergola could be a good fit. If you need more storage, you might consider a shed. Knowing what you want to keep inside will help you find the right size.

Storage sheds can also create more space and organization around your house by having a separate designated area for tools or equipment. This can free up space where they were previously kept, like a garage or a basement. These buildings can also be utilized in less traditional ways as a workspace, art studio or gym, or a place to relax and entertain.

For most outdoor structures, the top priority is finding level ground with enough space. "Some structures like sheds work better with concrete foundations or wooden bases. Other smaller structures can sit directly on the ground. But all require level surface to function properly," says Giallanza.

Some structures may require a permit and approval from homeowner associations. Since each location varies, be sure to do your research or hire a professional beforehand.

"As you become interested in more custom structures, you may want to consider tapping a professional with experi-



Jim's Amish Structures

A look inside a potting shed shows how outdoor structures can serve as a creative space beyond your home.

ence and easy-to-use design tools to help you perfect your building before making a purchase," he says.

Custom touches

For an HGTV Urban Oasis home in Ann Arbor, Studio Z Architecture designed a screen porch that was separate from the house. In this case, a freestanding four-car garage on the property was replaced with a two-car garage and a screen porch. "It has really gorgeous views of Ann Arbor," says Dawn Zuber, architect and owner of the Plymouth-based firm. "It's a huge space connected to the garage, which is really nicely finished."

When Zuber attended some events at the residence she also renovated, the screen porch that maximizes the modest footprint was a big hit. "Everybody wanted to congregate in there," she says. "It is by far the largest space in that project."

Distinctive features include expansive windows, a vaulted ceiling and exposed beams. "It is just so airy with a view of the sky," she says. The screen porch also has a small glass overhead door that rolls up to open it to the garage. "You can have one

big party room," adds Zuber. Brian Patrick Flynn did the interior design and Maven Development was the contractor.

For another home renovation, Dayna Tooman, a designer at Studio Z Architecture, equipped an existing detached garage in Farmington Hills with custom built-ins for the current owner. "She wanted a place for everything and she didn't want anything sitting out," the designer says. Right-sized cabinets house surplus materials like tile from the home renovation and can also accommodate seasonal collections.

A workspace positioned below a window creates the perfect spot for potting and other projects. The durable storage can stand up to garden tools and soil. Zuber says the material you choose for a garage should be easy to clean like the painted MDO (medium density overlay) featured here.

The architect says this can be a good time of year to plan for custom outdoor structures like the screen porch to be ready for next summer. "It does take some time to design them and coordinate with a contractor, get building permits and do

the construction, so you really need to plan in advance for a project like this," says Zuber.

Joint effort

For an expansive property in Ann Arbor, Cynthia Fink, landscape architect and owner of DC Design in Ann Arbor designed outdoor elements like a garden shed, built by her client, that incorporated French doors and windows for more light.

In addition to the gardens, Fink also designed an arbor that her client built as well. "It provides a focal point from the kitchen and a transition from the formal garden to the main natural garden," she says. For anyone considering outdoor structures, Fink says, "If you want them to be visible and part of the overall landscape plans, they need to be good looking and placement is key. Structures for storage that are plain and obscure can be more hidden."

Outdoor living

Among the popular options for new buildings, Jim's Amish Structures in St. Johns and Chelsea sells detached sun-



Emily Rose Imagery / Studio Z Architecture

An existing four-car garage that was separate from the house was replaced with a two-car garage and a screen porch during this HGTV Urban Oasis home renovation.



Laura McCaffery Photography / Studio Z Architecture

A detached garage in Farmington Hills was outfitted with custom cabinets and a personal workspace for potting and other projects.

rooms that customers can turn into a backyard hangout or home office space. "Some people put a futon or a fireplace in there or add insulation for the winter," says owner James Goble. "One customer put a hot tub in there."

From backyard cabins and potting sheds to artist studios with a dormer roof that lets in lots of light, outdoor structures often become a special destination. Open varieties like gazebos can feature screens for more protection.

Goble says they can take custom orders until early December to arrive before the holiday. "We've delivered on Christmas Eve a couple of times," he says. "One was a gazebo that was a gift. It had a bow on it." For playhouses, Goble often partners with Make-a-Wish Foundation, but some customers take another route to get this concept. "Some people get a larger shed that can serve as a playhouse when the kids are young and transition to storage later," he says.

They also offer outdoor structures for animals, such as dog kennels and rabbit

hutches, along with chicken coops that can be more customizable. For all categories, clearance is essential. "The access for us is important since these are delivered all assembled and not every yard has access," says Goble who also recommends checking with your city or local building department in advance.

Size should be another important consideration. "You can never go big enough if it's on the storage side," he says. One customer bought three sheds in a few years because he underestimated his needs.

Some of their structures, which are typically positioned on gravel pads, feature low-maintenance materials like vinyl with aluminum trim. Painted exteriors that customers often match to their main house, should get a new coat every 8 to 10 years. An added bonus for these buildings: "You can take them with you or sell them if you move," says Goble.

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Home Depot

Garden sheds offer a great escape for homeowners to get creative with colorful containers and other arrangements.



Jim's Amish Structures

These customizable chicken coops are a popular option at Jim's Amish Structures in St. Johns and Chelsea.



Jim's Amish Structures

Outdoor structures that have a more open concept like gazebos can feature screens for added protection.



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