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Fire Pits and Fiery Tables: The New Hot Items for the Back Yard

By Cathy Tyson



Jeannette and Jim Baird's dining patio with wood burning fireplace. Photo provided

While Lamorindans enjoy the last of our glorious fall weather, what better way to enjoy a slightly cool evening than to gather around a fire with friends and family? Nothing says ambiance like flames, or a marshmallow roasted to golden gooey deliciousness. From a simple pit to elaborate fireplace patio installations to fiery tables, homeowners and one local Country Club have successfully played with fire - with amazing results.

This past Friday the Moraga Country Club (MCC) celebrated the grand opening of its newest arrivals - a pair of substantial table-style fire pits with the second of two Fiery Friday Nights events. MCC Assistant General Manager Kathe Foster said they wanted another casual gathering place for the many members playing couples-tennis and golfers who have wrapped up 18 holes - ready for an adult beverage after a long week - or for families to enjoy the view. With a portable bar and food service available it's a lovely way to relax in the outdoor space. The sturdy tables each have a generous apron - wide enough to accommodate plates and glasses. Foster calls the fire tables the Club's "new toys" complete with cozy chairs and the addition of portable heaters in case the fog rolls in.

Other locals have warmed to the idea of accessorizing their own outdoor spaces with fire pits and fireplaces. Homeowner Jeannette Baird grew up just a few blocks away from her and husband Jim Baird's current home on the edge of Lafayette. She describes their outdoor room as "Italian inspired." An artist herself, Baird found magazine pictures of exactly what she wanted, showed them to her contractor and - voila! - a dining patio was born. The family loves the wood burning fireplace and has hosted many parties, book club get-togethers and even a Christmas brunch in front of the dramatic wood burning fireplace. The only downside is the squirrels that enjoy the grape vines winding their way up a column and onto the pergola, managing to nibble their way through the original strings of lights. The charming fixtures have since been replaced with commercial grade, squirrel-proof illumination.

Tucked onto a ridge in Orinda is Ellen Osmundson and John Allenberg's contemporary gas fire pit designed in partnership with Richard Sullivan and Shari Bashin of Enchanting Planting in Orinda. Ample seating is provided by cleverly incorporating a small retaining wall to address the sloping yard around the square stone fire pit. A Jacuzzi and barbecue area complete the upper portion of hardscape, in addition a welcoming patio with lounge chairs anchors the lower level of the home. Both the house and the fire pit area take full advantage of the spectacular view of rolling hills and highlight the privacy of the parcel.

Avid gardeners Jennifer and Allen Lescure had been shopping for a home with the potential for a multi-level back yard. They found it in a 1942 home that has been lovingly restored in Orinda with a sunny, usable, large rear space - a challenge considering Orinda's hilly terrain. The couple knew what kind of plants they wanted and enlisted the help of Garden Lights of Orinda to bring their vision to fruition. Mindfully including two Koi ponds, space for a compost area, a charming greenhouse along with bird cages and a friendly rabbit, their fireplace is nestled within the lush landscaping with welcoming green Adirondack chairs. "It's perfect for roasting marshmallows," said Jennifer Lescure, explaining the heat thrown out melts the marshmallows to perfection before they can burn.

A Rheem Valley Manor couple knew they wanted a fire pit area when their bluff-top yard was re-landscaped a number of years ago, and wisely had the contractor run a gas line out to the center of the flat lawn area. Fast forward a bit and these smart do-it-yourselfers visited a statuary shop in Half Moon Bay and purchased a large terra cotta urn that can also be used for a fountain. After maneuvering the cumbersome, ridiculously heavy piece into place, the rest was relatively easy. The lighting mechanism comes as a kit with installation instructions. The lady of the house vows that this is her last big project.

Another Moraga couple close to this writer's heart was looking for a low maintenance, but inviting lounging area and opted for a gas fireplace table combination. "Everyone seems to end up out there when we have guests," said homeowner Tom Tyson. Given the mild weather, it's used year round - with a lap blanket and a glass of wine on a cool fall evening or reading the Sunday paper with the dog. Of course the pooch doesn't read the paper, but he does enjoy the sunshine and is in charge of securing the air space in case a hawk flies by.



Kids enjoy "Fiery Friday Night" event at the Moraga Country Club. Photo Ohlen Alexander



Ellen Osmundson and John Allenberg's contemporary Orinda fire pit. Photo Cathy Tyson



Raleigh the wonder dog enjoying Moraga fire table. Photo Cathy Tyson



Fire with a view, a Rheem Valley Manor homemade fire pit. Photos Cathy Tyson



Jennifer and Allen Lescure's intimate fireplace, tucked into lush landscaping.



Happy hour at the Moraga Country Club's new fire pit.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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