

As winter days warm to spring, our thoughts turn to spending time outdoors on our decks, patios and in our swimming pools. Now is the time to design your outdoor haven for this summer's family get-togethers, elegant entertaining, or simple me-time. Certainly begin with your well-manicured lawn and stylish patio furniture, and then plan how your electronic systems will add music and lighting to the experience.

Whether you are working in the garden, hosting the neighborhood barbeque or snoozing in the hammock, music makes every activity more enjoyable. Thanks to technology, the same system that distributes songs from your entertainment system to speakers throughout your home can also send music to the deck, patio, pool, gardens, or anyplace else.

The first way to bring music outdoors is with a wireless distribution system. It uses a transmitter that plugs into the entertainment system indoors and wireless speakers outside which enable music to travel over radio frequency airwaves. Since wiring is unnecessary, speakers can be moved around, from the garden, porch, or hot tub area, as long as they're within range of the transmitter and can be plugged into an A/C outlet (or have fresh batteries).

If high-quality audio is important to you, wire the speakers directly to the entertainment system. Once the wire is trenched into the ground, it'll be difficult to move it, so be sure to map out where you want the speakers before burying the speaker wire. Ideas for placement of speakers include decks and patios, the swimming pool and hot tub, your gardens and the front porch.

Outdoor speakers are available in a range of styles including those that resemble rocks. They are made of natural-looking materials and are designed to blend in with the landscape. Since they're weather and water resistant you can leave them out in the rain and snow. Some speakers double as planters for your flowers, some can be hung from trees, and some look just like regular bookshelf-style units that can be mounted to the exterior of your home.

Take into consideration that outdoor speakers differ in how they direct their sound. Some speakers project sound outward from the front of their grilles and are ideal for a deck, where you'll be sitting in one place and would like to enjoy a two-channel stereo effect. Omni-directional speakers spill out sound from all sides so no matter where you stand or sit, you'll be able to hear music. These speakers are a good choice for gardens, pools and other areas where you'll be moving around.

Decorative lighting can set the mood for any event. For evening gatherings, you'll need more than just the standard motion-triggered lights for your backyard. Fixtures planted around the outside of patios, decks and other social spots can help define the area and create a festive atmosphere. It also makes it easier for your guests to find their way around. When you put the lights on a control system, you won't even have to worry about turning them on and off. As the sun sets, the system can activate the lights. Then at midnight (or whatever time you choose), the system can shut them off. Of course, there will be times when you'll want to stay in control. From a keypad, you can decide which groups of lights to turn on and which to leave off. A nighttime swimming party may call for lights on in the pool area with a dimmed walkway to the house. Alternatively, light just the gardens surrounding your hot tub while enjoying a late night soak. Outdoor lighting also adds to the safety of your home and family. By tying the exterior lights into your home's security system, you'll be able to illuminate the entire backyard simply by pressing one button.

So bring on summer. Grab a beer and enjoy your own mini-vacation each time you step out your patio door.

By: Lori Ruedinger