

# Heated seats and fire pits help extend season for pandemic socializing

Minnesotans are turning to blankets, heaters and even electric furniture to warm their outdoor spaces for COVID-safe gatherings.

By [Rachel Hutton](#) Star Tribune | October 20, 2020



Erin's Duininck's family plans ahead when they're having friends over to watch the outdoor movies. Provided It hasn't been easy for Erin Duininck, owner of the Golden Rule in Excelsior, to shepherd her 5-year-old boutique and 4-year-old son through a pandemic. But her biggest challenge has been balancing her 16-year-old daughter's desire for social interaction with protecting the family from the virus.

"She's my wild card," Duininck said. "So I've been trying to come up with ways that we can safely host her friends."

One of Duininck's ideas: creating a chic, plein-air movie theater that could bring teens together safely. So she set up an inexpensive outdoor projector and screen on the deck of her home and styled the patio furniture with vintage wool blankets.

Duininck's concerns about COVID-19's ability to spread in poorly ventilated spaces have caused her to eschew indoor gatherings for the past several months. As the weather cools, she and many other Minnesotans are looking for ways to extend the season for the outdoor spaces they've used to socialize safely.

Some will warm up their backyards with fire pits and heated furniture. Others will find semi-enclosed, well-ventilated shelter in a gussied-up garage.

## Welcome Home

To make her deck even cozier, Duininck plans to buy an industrial heater designed for construction sites (the propane patio heaters she's used for New Year's parties past were destroyed by wind). She's also considering DIY-ing a screened-in porch and partly encasing it with plexiglass.

These efforts, Duininck hopes, will allow her family to continue gathering small groups outside. "We can keep it going — probably not when the snow flies — but longer than normal," she said.

In its 40-year history, the St. Paul landscape company Southview Design has seen the idea of a basic backyard deck or patio evolve into "outdoor rooms," said landscape architect Meg Arnosti. These sophisticated spaces are stocked with elements to lure homeowners outdoors: water and fire features; weatherproof kitchens and televisions; pergolas, porches, and plantings to protect from the elements; ambient lighting to set the mood.

"They're designed to feel as if they're an extension of your home," Arnosti said.

With coronavirus curtailing travel, Southview has seen increased demand for improving outdoor spaces, as clients funnel vacation funds into creating their own "haven at home," Arnosti said.

Two years ago, Arnosti designed just such a sanctuary for Melanie Rake's Minnetonka home: a multilevel terrace with spaces for outdoor cooking, gathering around a gas fire pit, or dipping into a plunge pool or hot tub that's kept on through most of the winter.

During the stay-at-home order last spring, Rake says her backyard got constant use.

"We were getting out there on the first 40-degree day and having bonfires at night, and it was so nice to just be able to get outside of the house and get the fresh air no matter how cool it was," she said. "As we lose the sun earlier in the day, it just really gives you energy to be able to be outside."

Rake said she feels grateful for having a space to host small, socially distanced gatherings and connect with others in a safe way — as do her guests. "Our neighbors actually described it as like an outdoor oasis," she said.

SCOTT ERIE'S family and friends have been similarly impressed by the four-season garage manal attached to his Eagan home — though not quite motivated to create their own.

“People make those noises, but it’s a big undertaking,” he said of creating the fully insulated, gas-heated workshop, which is lit by the glow of an extensive beer sign collection.

This summer, Erie, a “semiretired IT guy,” used the space to create a fully functioning, 8-foot-square replica of Nicollet Island’s neon Grain Belt sign (he’s a member of [Twin Cities Maker](#)). His wife also hosted friends in the open garage when rain prohibited them from using the deck, something she plans to continue this fall.

“They can sit around in a big circle out there and have a glass of wine and chit chat,” Erie said. “It gives them enough room to spread out.”

Vents, fires and hot seats

Ventilation is critical to reducing airborne virus transmission, said Chris Hogan, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Minnesota.

Hogan, an editor of the Journal of Aerosol Science, said that reasonable airflow can be created indoors by bringing fresh air in.

“There’s a lot of evidence that leaving multiple windows open about 6 inches does a pretty good job on the air change rate,” he said. Optimally, you’d want to open multiple windows on different walls to create cross-ventilation, he said — so in the case of a garage, it’s best to stay near the open door.

Though partly enclosing an outdoor space can help block wind and retain heat, it impedes ventilation. So being entirely outdoors most effectively dilutes airborne virus, Hogan said.

A socially distanced gathering around a fire, he noted, can have extra safety benefits. The heat creates a convection current that draws air up and away. The heat can also potentially kill airborne virus particles.

“A lot of stuff doesn’t survive the high temperature of a fire very well, and incineration is a way of disinfecting,” Hogan said.

To stay warm all winter in his Duluth backyard, Greg Benson simply plugs in his chair.