

# Gather around the fire

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## Fire Features

Here's how to incorporate timeless fire features that enhance outdoor spaces.

Brooke Bilyj



All photos courtesy of Southview Design Landscape Contractors

There's nothing necessarily new with fire, so you might not hear contractors buzzing about trends. But by embracing the timeless, primal allure of fire to add warmth and ambiance to any outdoor space, contractors are finding hot growth opportunities in this niche.

"Our love of fire is instinctual. We've enjoyed being around fire since the beginning of time," says Scott Cohen, garden artisan and owner of The Green Scene Landscaping and Swimming Pools outside of Los Angeles. "Now, it's almost a required element. It's rare today that we design an outdoor living space that doesn't include a fire feature."

More than 75 percent of The Green Scene's projects include at least one fire feature. Cohen's firm designed and constructed over \$252,000 worth of fire features over the last 12 months – up 26 percent from the last fiscal year.

Cohen sees plenty more growth potential in this service for contractors who can master the basics and avoid common mistakes.

“Fire features are a great element to add to any landscape, but they require some responsibility and respect for fire – which can quickly cause problems if not contained properly,” says Cohen, who frequently serves as a construction defect expert witness in court. “I’ve been involved in a number of cases where people got hurt as the result of some mistakes that were made in the construction or design of a fire feature.”

Here are some tips from Cohen and other contractors for creating safe, timeless fire features that provide resort-like experiences for customers.



It’s important to consider the client’s view when designing and installing a fire feature.

### Room with a view.

“Good design starts with understanding your clients’ needs,” says Cohen, who has authored eight design and construction books – including Scott Cohen’s *Outdoor Fireplaces and Fire Pits*. “Rule number one is ‘form follows function,’ so you need to ask the right questions to get an idea of how the client intends to use the space and what the site conditions call for.”

Cohen often ends up in a “battle of the sexes” with clients, “where the husband wants a fire pit and the wife wants a fireplace.” Deciding which type of fire feature to design depends on a few factors – mainly, how many people will be gathered around it, and what other features

comprise the outdoor space.

“There’s nothing better than a fireplace to anchor an outdoor living room and create romantic ambiance,” says Cohen, who has 25 years of experience designing fire features. “But fire pits work better for entertaining larger groups because they encourage conversation better than a fireplace does.”

A fireplace might be a good solution for screening issues – whether to block a prevailing wind or to provide privacy from neighbors. It naturally creates a wall that can help define an outdoor kitchen or living room – which is often the end result that customers want to achieve.

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“The trend is creating outdoor rooms,” says Josh Koller, designer and partner at Southview Design Landscape Contractors in St. Paul, Minnesota, a full-service design/build firm where about 40 percent of projects include fire features. “Calls for fireplaces have been going up over the last five years because people want to create an outdoor living space that feels like a room, and you get more of that from a fireplace than a fire pit.”

Of course, surrounding landscape elements such as pergolas, pools and other water features might also dictate where and how to incorporate fire. Specifically, the combination of fire and water is a natural pairing that's increasingly popular.

"A few of our newer jobs have been incorporating the elements of fire and water together – whether it's a fireplace built into a spa or fire balls adorning the poolscape," says Mitchell Knapp, owner of Scenic Landscaping LLC in New Jersey, where nearly half of all his projects include a fire feature. "Clients want their fire feature to aesthetically work into their existing architecture and landscape."

Cohen likes to place fire features adjacent to water, too, but he reminds contractors to consider placement carefully when designing outdoor living spaces. He asks to step inside prospective clients' homes during his initial visit to observe their view from the window, to make sure his design doesn't obstruct any interesting focal points.

Koller says interesting views are important in the design.

"If someone lives on a lake, they don't want to have their back to the lake to face the fireplace, and they don't want to have a fireplace in front of the lake," he says.

"Clients want their fire feature to aesthetically work into their existing architecture and landscape." *Mitchell Knapp, owner, Scenic Landscaping LLC*

### Safe materials.

Once you determine the prime location for a fire feature that meets your clients' needs, choosing the right materials can impact the safety and aesthetics of your design.

Though the particular style will depend on the architecture of the home and the preferences of the homeowners, The Green Scene constructs most of its fire features with cast concrete materials. Southview usually uses stone or concrete surround with veneer.

Natural gas is becoming the most popular fuel choice for fire features, though exceptions certainly apply.

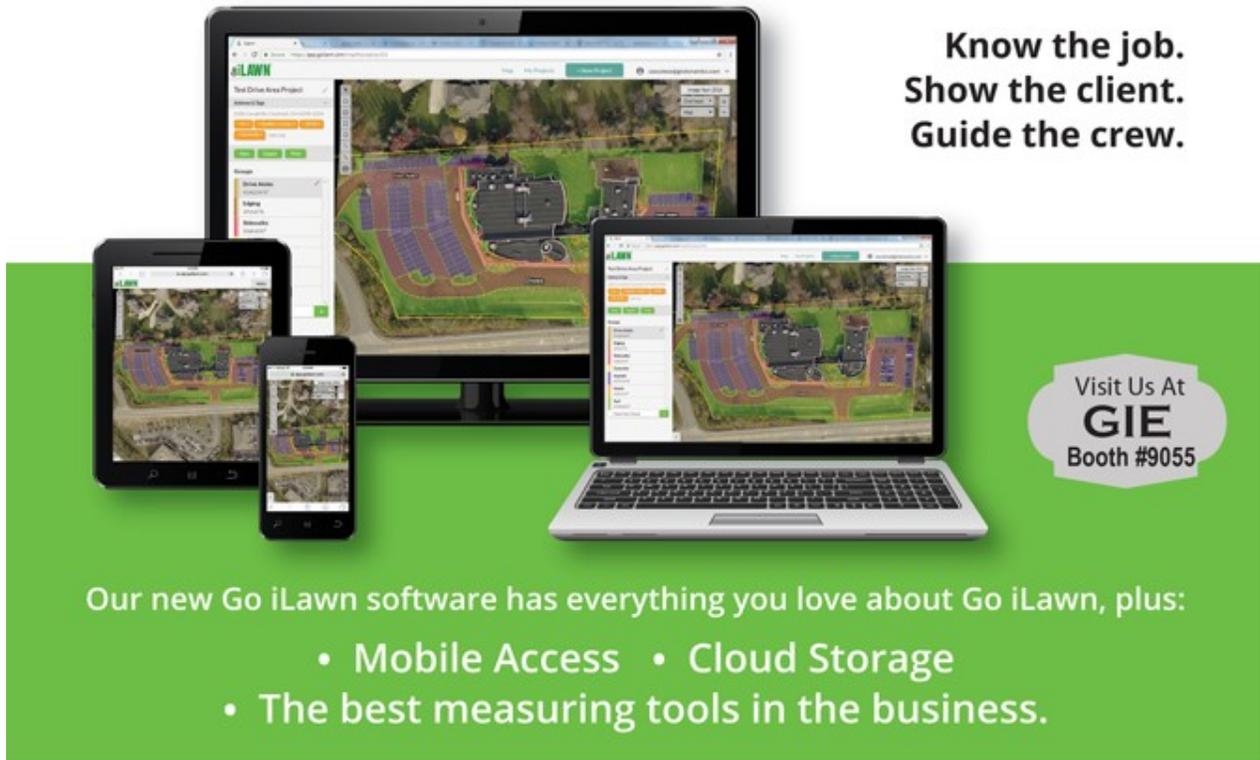
"Natural gas burns a little cleaner than propane, so you don't get residuals on your glass fill media," Cohen says. "We always prefer natural gas – but we do use propane when we're on difficult-to-access sites where we'd have to run a really long gas line to the house."

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Koller says Southview installs more gas-powered fire features than wood-burning ones – about a 70/30 split – because most customers want the convenience of flipping a switch to get heat. Still, some customers prefer the experience of building fires the old-fashioned way. Even then, Koller says, “we’re running conduit for almost every wood-burning unit we install, so that if they want to convert to gas later, it won’t be such a difficult thing to do.”

Cohen always recommends manual burners over automatic remote-control burners, “because I want the person who’s lighting the fire to be engaging with the site conditions when they light it,” he says. “Automatic start features don’t take into account the wind or the crowd, but if you have a windy day or small children present, you can adjust the height of the fire accordingly with a manual burner.”

Safety should always be a top concern, he says. Most importantly, your materials and media must obviously be designed for use around fire.

“I’ve seen contractors use natural river rocks as media fill, and natural river rocks will explode when they’re overheated,” Cohen says. “Similarly, a lot of contractors will use cinderblocks, but the aggregates inside cinderblocks can also overheat and explode, so you need to use a refractory firebrick on the interior of your fire features to prevent that from happening. That’s probably one of the biggest mistakes I see, is that contractors fail to use a firebrick interior, but it’s critical.”



Contractors should focus on selling the ambiance and memories that can be created with a fire feature.

### Selling an experience.

A perfectly positioned, safely constructed fire feature can add more than aesthetic ambiance to a landscape – after all, the whole point is adding warmth, helping to extend patio season into fall.

“One of the reasons that fire features are big in the Midwest is because we have short summers and we want to enjoy (our backyards) as long as we can,” Koller says.

For that reason, the key to selling these features is helping customers envision how they'll spend that extra time outdoors.

"The real secret, if you must know why fire features are so popular, in a word, is marshmallows," Cohen says. "Roasting marshmallows and eating s'mores – that's what it's all about. My kids enjoyed eating s'mores when they were young, and now when they come home from college, the first thing they do is break out the s'mores and run out to the fire pit."

Americans buy more than 90 million pounds of marshmallows every year, according to the National Confectioners Association – and about half of those are toasted over a fire.

What does that have to do with selling fire pits? Everything, Cohen says, because customers don't just want a fire feature – they want the experiences and the memories that come with it.

"You're creating a destination when you create a fire feature," Cohen says. "The bigger-picture trend is that people are looking to create a resort-like feel in their own backyard, and when they reminisce about their last vacation – sitting next to a fire feature by a swimming pool or bar, sipping cocktails and telling stories around the fire – they want to create that same environment at home.

"That's why fire features are so popular – because they fall in line with the growing trend of resort-style living in your own backyard."