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YOUR MONEY-Summer livin' is easy, but doesn't come cheap anymore



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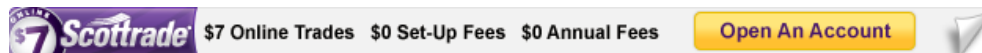
CHICAGO, March 14 (Reuters) - As a Brooklyn-based architect, James Schaefer works on properties with some very high-end patios - think in the \$100,000 range - which, of course, gets him thinking about his own. His own scale is a little lower, about "\$25,000 to get a start at it," Schaefer says.

For that, his 19 x 35 ft. (5.8 meter x 10.7 meter) outdoor space in Park Slope will get pretty souped up. "We will definitely put in a grill, piped-in natural gas and it would be fun to put a bocce lane in there," he says. "We'd like a nice table, some lighting and we'd plant a tree, but since we don't have lots of space, it might be something smaller like a Japanese maple."

With home improvement spending dramatically on the rise, backyards are vying with bathroom renovations and kitchen upgrades for homeowner dollars. Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies forecasts double-digit gains in home improvement spending for 2014. First-quarter spending in 2014 on home improvement was estimated at \$144.7 billion, up from \$127 billion the same period in 2013 - a jump of nearly 14 percent.

"Over the last five years, after the financial collapse in 2008, the industry has seen steady growth," says Jonathan Freeman, president of FurnitureForPatio.com, a Chicago-based website. "Homeowners demand and want a great outdoor living space as part of the total package of a home and homebuilders list it as a high priority for new construction."

Any money spent could add to the value of a home. "If the patio costs \$12,000 to \$20,000, you'll probably get \$40,000 back as long as it's big enough to put some tables and chairs out there," says Ben Salem, a real estate agent with Rodeo Realty in Beverly Hills, California.



GENDER DESIGNING

The question of what you'll stack those patios with often depends on your gender, says Blanche Garcia, owner of her own design firm in Montclair, New Jersey. "I find that women like to upgrade more with plants and foliage around the property, outdoor pergolas and enclosures that can be created for entertaining. Men go for more of the higher end gadgets like outdoor kitchens and barbecues."

As for how that might break down pricewise, a homeowner could easily spend \$25,000 for a 500 sq. ft. (46.5 sq. meter)patio without batting an eye, says Robert Palmarozza, owner of Mr. Handyman Tri-County in Wayne, New Jersey. He estimates the following costs associated with a patio renovation: hardscaping and pavers (\$5,000-\$10,000+); outdoor grill area with sink (\$3,000-\$25,000+); 42-in. (107-cm.) flat panel TV and sound system (\$2,500+); fire pit with seating (\$1,000-\$5,000+); and a teak table with chairs and benches (\$4,000+).

"Outdoor fireplaces, chimeneas, smokers and old-fashioned charcoal grills are always popular," Palmarozza says. "When you're trying to recapture past memories and create new ones, nothing stirs primal instincts more than fire."

For patio elitists, appliances like the Wolf OG54, a 6-burner gas grill that pumps out 25,000 BTU and lists for about \$8,000, stir the juices even more. "The Weber charcoal type grill is not a big thing in these high-end gardens," says Schaefer, who also lists Viking as another prized brand. "My clients don't want to use them. It's too much work."

Expect outdoor furniture to run as much as indoor sets. "Gone are the days of some folding chairs," says Sabine H. Schoenberg, a real estate developer and author based in Greenwich, Connecticut. "Especially in high-end homes, homeowners are spending as much money on outdoor furniture as they spend on living room furniture."

FurnitureForPatio.com, for instance features a list of Top 10 furniture sets being updated for 2014. Sectionals made by the likes of Lloyd Flanders, North Cape and Telescope Casual will set you back anywhere from \$4,200 to \$8,500. At the top of that range, the OW Lee sectional, which seats six, can be ordered with a fire pit coffee table with slate



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HOW TO PAY FOR IT ALL

As for where the funding is coming from, the burgeoning market for unsecured loans might have something to do with it. Since SunTrust Banks Inc. began offering its unsecured "AnythingLoan" of 10,000-\$100,000 through LightStream.com for customers with good credit, "We've seen lot of home improvement projects over the last 12 months," says Gary Miller, the SunTrust senior vice president who runs LightStream. "The home improvement category is a good piece of the business that we do, and it's been ticking up the past couple of years. People are looking to get things done and the economy is ticking up."

But if Kathy Miller of Evanston, Illinois proves anything, it's that you can gussy up your patio in fine style without breaking the bank. An avid yard sale shopper, she found the centerpiece of her patio setup - a glass-top umbrella table set with eight swivel rocking Brown Jordan dining chairs - for \$700.

Brand new, the setup would have cost her thousands of dollars, she says.

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