

At Ease

Five reasons why a portable spa makes a hot addition to any home

By Margi Millunzi Some days, you just want to get away from it all. After a long, stressful day at work and a seemingly longer commute home, you want to be pampered. But getting away is a hassle in itself: There are reservations to be made, people to deal with and another drive to endure.

Rather than go away, you can create that oasis of relaxation and rejuvenation in your own backyard. A portable spa combines all the benefits of a day spa with all the conveniences of home.

Here are some key reasons why a spa should be a part of your great escape:

1 The perfect fit

If Goldilocks were looking for a portable spa, she'd find plenty of options in just the right size: There are models that fit every nook, cranny and wide-open space.

If you're short on space but still long for a soak, consider a compact spa model



JACUZZI HOT TUBS

that fits one to two people. Many feature triangular designs so they can tuck neatly into corners. These units, which come fully equipped with all the amenities, often are small enough to fit through doorways and are perfect for smaller patios and rooftop decks.

If you have a little more elbow room — and a desire to share spa time with your family and friends — go for something larger. Spa brands typically offer models in a range of sizes that fit anywhere from four to 10 people comfortably. Barrier-free seating on many of these spas mean that you easily can scoot around from seat to seat.

If your yard isn't quite big enough for a pool, but you still want to do laps, a swim spa will serve you right. These larger-scale vessels take up less space than a typical pool, but feature a jetted current that you can swim against. You can get laps in without wasting any space. As an added benefit, many swim spas feature hydrotherapy jets, so you can relax after the workout.

2 The stress relief

Gone are the days when spas featured a few jets, all at the same height. Now there can be up to 80 jets at differing heights in one unit alone. Today's spa jets have been fine-tuned to provide you with just the right hydrotherapy, from the gentlest of bubbles to an invigorating deep-tissue massage. The jets are more precise, powerful and varied. And each seat features a different jet configuration designed to soothe your muscles and leave you wanting more.

The targeted jet action is designed to ease the tension in your body from head to toe and every point in between. Some jets send water spinning, spiraling and pulsating to major stress spots: the neck, shoulders, lower back and calves. Other jets emit bubbles that gently massage tired hands and feet. Even better, you can adjust the direction of the jets and strength of the water flow so you can vary the intensity of the hydrotherapy you receive.

3 The high-tech options

Modern spas have gone high-tech in a big way. Many now sport the latest in home-entertainment equipment, including built-in CD/DVD players, iPod/MP3 docking stations, surround-sound systems, pop-up plasma screen televisions and other electronics. That way, you can still stay connected after you're done getting away from it all.

And thanks to advances in technology,



The ultimate getaway: Today's spa options run the gamut — from soothing waterfalls, advanced hydrotherapy jets and chromotherapy lights to surround-sound systems and pop-up TVs.

Decorating tips

To transform a yard with a standard portable spa into a special retreat, try these suggestions:

Placement Where and how your spa is placed is the most important part of creating a spectacular setting. Keep it within close range of your home — no one wants to hike across the backyard to get to the spa. Also, make sure it's located near an electrical source and in an area with proper drainage. Keep in mind the views you will see when you're in the spa. Position the unit so you'll have a pleasant view, be it of the garden, the sun-set over a mountain or an outdoor television.

Privacy Relaxing in a spa means not having your neighbors look down at you over the fence

or from their second-story window. A pergola outfitted with lattice coverings overhead can allow sunlight to enter the space while ensuring your privacy. Or tuck your spa inside a gazebo for the ultimate in private soaking. Plants and trees also effectively shield spa users from onlookers.

Landscaping Create your own Garden of Eden with an assortment of flowers, shrubs and trees. Potted plants surrounding the spa provide a great touch of color, and also can help blend the spa cabinet into the surroundings. Fragrant and colorful flowers can add to the therapeutic experience, as well as evergreens, which thrive in wintertime.

Enhancement A spa doesn't have to stand alone. Add a chiminea, fire pit, music speakers, waterfall or

a small pond with a bubbling feature to create a relaxing getaway. The spa area should encourage relaxation and socialization. Furnish it with comfy outdoor couches and chairs so those not soaking can still be part of the action.

Accessorize Sometimes it's the small touches that have the biggest impact. Provide shade under a colorful, all-weather umbrella. Include towel holders to keep cover-ups dry and close at hand. For a luxurious touch in the cooler months, use a towel warmer. Include outdoor candles, a weatherproof chandelier or hanging lights to set a romantic mood. You may never leave your backyard!

— Rin-rin Yu



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COAST SPAS MFG. INC. / APSP



CRYSTALVIEW POOL & SPA / APSP

Backyard beauties: All eyes are on these gorgeous spas, which feature carefully designed layouts, decorative surrounds and lush landscaping.

you can easily manage these high-tech features as well as adjust the temperature, lighting, jet action and other functions — with a simple touch of a button. It's convenience at its best: You can monitor most spa functions from a handheld remote control, a spaside display or a keypad panel located in your home. Some spas even “talk back” and will alert you when the temperature is too high or if something doesn't go as expected. An added bonus: With cell phone access to the controls panel, you can turn on your spa while you're stuck in traffic, and it'll be ready for you by the time you get home.

4 The looks

Today's spas are designed to complement your home's architecture and décor. The acrylic spa shell is offered in numerous colors and textures, from glossy pearlescent white to faux-leather onyx. To heighten the look of the water, try an aqua shade in a granitelike texture. For a more modern touch, go for a sleek black shell with chrome accents or amp up your design with a stainless steel shell for a one-of-a-kind look.

The spa cabinet (its siding) also can boost the look of your home. While some natural wood options still are available,

most cabinets now are made of a synthetic woodlike product. This low-maintenance material doesn't need to be cleaned and sealed like real wood, and is available in a variety of colors as well as tones that mimic the look of redwood, cedar and aged teak. Want a more timeless effect? Go for a custom faux stacked stone cabinet.

While they are portable, modern spas are designed to be versatile. Most are placed

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as-is on a concrete slab aboveground. However, they can be installed with a more built-in look as well. The spa shell can be recessed into the ground to create a seamless design. Or wrap your spa in a prefab surround — ones that look like steps or a sit-down bar are especially popular.

5 The accessories

In keeping with the outdoor-living trend, spas have evolved into entertainment centers. Some models come equipped with dramatic waterfalls, colored LED lights, aromatherapy systems and misters that enhance the spa experience.

Waterfalls, in particular, are hot right now. The falls provide a little eye candy as well as the enticing sound of splashing water. In fact, a spa can be used as a waterfeature even when you're not in it. Favorite falls include arcs that shoot into the center of the spa, smooth sheets of water and gentle spillover effects.

Additional accessories abound as well. You can outfit the spa with towel warmers and racks, ice buckets, stand-alone refrigerators, cup holders, neck pillows, in-spa cushions and more. For safety, each spa comes with a cover, which keeps unwelcome pests out and the heat in. A cover lift makes it easy for one person to remove and replace the top. ■

A perfect prescription

Spa soaking has many beneficial effects on the body. See how warm-water therapy can treat some common ailments.

Stress If you're feeling stressed out, a spa's warm water will release the tension in your body, and allow your mind to take a break from anxious or troubled thoughts. For headache sufferers, the warmth and jet action ease pressure on the neck and shoulders and reduce the pain.

Insomnia The National Sleep Foundation recommends a soak in a spa as one of its top methods for inducing sleep. Raising the body's core temperature several degrees, then allowing it to drop naturally, can make even the most stubborn insomniac sleepy. Soaking in a spa, set at 103- to 104 degrees F, for at least 20 minutes two hours before bed should do the trick.

Lower back pain If your back is killing you, you're not alone. Eighty-four percent of Americans will suffer severe lower back pain at some time in their lives. Spa soaking can ease muscular *and* skeletal pain. The buoyancy of the spa water takes the pressure off the lower back, and the heat relaxes the muscles while increasing your heartbeat and blood flow.

Arthritis and injuries Gentle exercise in buoyant spa water allows damaged joints and muscles to move freely, without the stiffness and aches typically associated with land-based movement. Spa-based hydrotherapy has been found to speed up healing time and strengthen muscles after an injury or surgery.

Diabetes Studies are ongoing, but there's evidence that spa use can ease some of the severity of Type 2 diabetes, and can even lower the amount of insulin needed. Immersion in the warm water mimics some of the beneficial effects of exercise: It causes blood pressure to drop, which forces the heart to beat harder and faster. This increases the blood flow to the skin and muscles.

Note: Consult your doctor before undertaking any therapy regimen. For more information on warm-water benefits, visit www.hottubliving.com.

— Laurel Delp and Margi Millunzi