

Mark and Melissa Belcher remade their outdoor space mainly for their children, but they take pleasure in it as well.



# Outdoor EXUBERANCE

Alfresco Living is Year-Round Proposition for these Families

By Michael J. Solender



**Top:** Jim and Margaret Foster enjoy the tranquility of al fresco dining. **Left and Middle:** Jim loves to cook in the 800-degree, wood-burning pizza oven, as well as on the Big Green Egg grill. **Right:** Ashley Robinson (from left), Katie Foster and Molly Foster like hanging out at the pool.

EXTENDING LIVING SPACE INTO THE GREAT OUTDOORS is a popular trend that continues to capture the imagination of homeowners. Two Ballantyne-area families, the Fosters and the Belchers, graciously shared with the magazine their visions for alfresco living and how they've brought them to life.

Visitors to Jim and Margaret Foster's Carmel Estates East home are welcomed by nature's tranquility from the moment they walk into the front door of the two-story Georgian Revival style home. The light from the Fosters' screen porch cascades into the heart of their home, spilling out from the family room's bank of east-facing windows.

The impeccably designed and outfitted outdoor living space sounds a clear call for the entire family, especially the Fosters' three teenage girls who take full advantage of the porch and the adjacent open-air living area, complete with a custom pool, Jacuzzi, kitchen, dining area and more.

When you experience the peacefulness

of the private backyard, it is difficult to imagine the space was once a severely sloping hill requiring nearly 40 truckloads of dirt removal before making the property level.

The Fosters, owners of Selwyn Avenue Pub, are longtime Charlotte residents. They bought the home 17 years ago just before their oldest daughter was born. Originally five bedrooms with three and one half baths, the home didn't fully accommodate the Fosters' outdoor lifestyle and desire for frequent casual entertaining.

### Central Entertainment Spot

"We came to the conclusion a few years back when our girls started to get older that we wanted each to have her own room and bath," Jim says. "Additionally we wanted to provide a central place for entertaining and dining that was welcoming for their friends and could easily accommodate a large number of people. As we planned our remodel, outdoor living space played a very large role and was important in our plans."

The remodel took seven months after almost a year of planning, and was completed in 2011.

Ultimately the Fosters added 2,600 square feet to their home and created a backyard oasis that only a downpour can dampen.

Light beige travertine with gold veins provides solid decking and a cool-to-the-touch cushion for bare feet. The renovated backyard showcases a large saltwater pool where almost one third of the area nearby is a tanning deck. The rectangular pool is crowned with a step-up level, fieldstone-ringed Jacuzzi, where a spillway flows endlessly into the main pool.

Outside dining was clearly a priority for the Fosters, starting with ample granite counter space. The area is even wired for cable should they take in a ballgame, but there may be no need to divert attention from the real action, which are the fire-breathing cooking options available to Jim, resident keeper of the flame.

First up is the extra large Big Green Egg, a to-die-for cooking accessory for many a grill. Jim says this baby will

easily smoke a 25-pound turkey. One look inside after he pops the lid reveals almost enough space for a small convertible.

### 800-Degree Pizza Oven

Adjacent to the Big Green Egg is an extra large nine-burner gas grill that Jim calls his tool of choice for quick meals like steaks and burgers. Right below is built-in refrigeration. Slide down the countertop a step and there is the same Chicago pizza oven that Chef Mario Batali uses. Jim can fire up some mean pies in minutes in this wood-burning oven where 800 degrees is the norm.

Storage drawers are built under the countertops, and a trash drawer is stowed away out of critter reach.

Frontgate patio furniture surrounds the back with a chat table, multiple chaises, umbrellas and loungers.

Pool management is a breeze for



**Bottom Left:** The Belchers enjoy having an additional family room outside.

**Top, Right Top:** Melissa and Mark cool off in the pool and spa.

**Right Middle, Right Bottom:** Sipping libations by the pool and fireplace is a great way to relax.



Margaret with a smart remote specific to the pool (see page 72). With a touch, she can stop the spillway and start the fountains, control the water temperature and even program the pool lighting to offer a seemingly endless array of colors or themes. Pull out the smartphone, punch in a few commands on a special app and silent outdoor speakers snap to life playing music from the kids' "Spotify" account.

But nearby, the screen porch — a year-round gathering place with a large dining table, big-screen TV, granite countertops, refrigerator and wet bar — almost didn't happen.

"I was reluctant to break up the sight lines from inside the house outside," says Margaret. "When our contractor at Tri-Square Construction showed me how fine and unobtrusive the screen was, and lobbied for a screen porch, I finally relented and am really glad I did." Infrared heaters in the ceiling keep the Fosters toasty even on the coolest winter evenings.

"We couldn't be happier with how things turned out," says Jim, "We truly have the perfect layout for our way of living."

### Seeking a Family Room

For Mark and Melissa Belcher, engineering a remake of their outdoor living space at their

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**COOL GADGET:  
THE POOL  
REMOTE**

Today's backyard pools come with many sophisticated high-tech options, from programmable light shows and fountain displays to imbedded self-cleaning systems and temperature and pump controls. One way to stay on top of poolside management is through the pool remote control.

Remotes range from temperature, lighting, spa and circuit controls to comprehensive management that involves a phone and audio/video system interface, saltwater chlorination regulation, self-cleaning controls and more. Most remotes are waterproof, and some even float.

Intellitouch Systems by Pentair offers touch-screen navigation, remote control monitoring of the pool and email alerts when things are amiss. These systems don't come cheap, however, as the Intellitouch systems range from \$499 to well over \$2,000.



The Belchers' son Mason and daughter Grace give the pool a good workout, while Mom and Dad chill out.

Highgrove home in Ballantyne was all about adding an additional family room. He is a stay-at-home dad, and she's an executive with Bank of America. They wanted a magnet to keep their two children close to home enjoying outdoor activities, whether entertaining friends or just relaxing themselves.

"We built our home in 2005/2006," says Mark. "We did have a large outdoor fireplace built at the time; though, the rest of the back was modestly landscaped with five large oak trees and a wood deck."

The space the Belchers enjoy today was designed and built over four and a half months in 2008 in a project managed by Metro GreenScape. It offers a dramatic combination of hardscape and landscape elements alongside a custom pool with fountain features that provide pleasant falling water sounds suggestive of grand European gardens.

**Waterslide Twists and Turns**

The children, daughter Grace, 9, and

son Mason, 15, take full advantage of a 24-foot glass mosaic, tile-lined waterslide that twists alongside the retaining wall, sloping gently as it delivers its precious cargo softly into the pool.

Mark smiles broadly when discussing this particular feature. "We needed to do something from a design standpoint to maintain support for the retaining wall, the slide was just the right element and something the kids and their friends simply love," he recalls.

The free-form pool is spacious and has two large fountain features where water cascades in a two-foot drop. A round Jacuzzi with a spillway fountain flows into the pool. The spa is surrounded by Tennessee fieldstone, the same accent stone found in the fireplace and fountain features. Natural brick pavers make up the decking, and handsome, slate-like blue stone rims it, adding a casual elegance to the design.

Whimsy touches the landscape as Mark's flea-market find, a giant rooster, acts as an

unofficial lifeguard, overlooking the pool from a shady spot under tall trees toward the back of the lot.

“We knew most of the features we wanted to have in our outdoor living space,” says Melissa, who noted that some ideas came from the popular HGTV show, “Amazing Backyards.” In addition to the pool, an outdoor-shaded, back-porch area was a priority, she says.

### Cozy Space, S’mores

The Belchers have achieved success with that as the former open and unshaded deck was transformed into a cozy outdoor family room with comfy indoor/outdoor couches, chairs and a big-screen TV that plays host for many fall movie nights for the family. A high-tech fan spins unobtrusively from the tongue-in-groove, stained pine ceiling.

Nearby, the large outdoor fireplace is perfect for ghost stories or just reliving the day’s activities. There are always plenty of fixings for s’mores on hand; it is a rare evening fire that doesn’t feature the sweet and chocolaty treats.

“Perhaps the biggest surprise for me,” says Melissa, “is how much time we actually spend out here. Even during the hottest days in the summer, the porch is comfortable, and we can use the pool often right through December.” ☺



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