

# Home + GARDEN

## HOME IS WHERE



A gas fireplace is tucked in the corner, flush with the floor, near an asymmetrical placement of the TV that adds visual interest.



A corner fireplace set into the wall surrounded by bold tile offers a clean, minimalist look.

# THE HEARTH IS

Fireplaces can create a cozy atmosphere, and newer gas and electric options can modernize your house's old flame



JACKSON DESIGN AND REMODELING IMAGES

BY CARON GOLDEN

If you ask Jen Pinto to describe the ugliest fireplace she's encountered in her years as an interior designer, there's no hesitation.

"It was in a home by the water with a 1970s design," she recalled. "It had dated stone columns on either side with a mirror above the firebox opening, while the rest of the fireplace was painted white brick. It was *really* ugly."

Pinto, a senior interior designer with Jackson Design and Remodeling, was able to transform the wood-burning fireplace by pushing out the exterior wall to create a pair of alcoves with inset shelves and white cabinets on either side. She replaced the brick and the mirror with more contemporary stacked natural stone for a cozy, rustic feel; added a white oak mantel; and outfitted the firebox opening with a screen pattern resembling sea kelp to complement its coastal setting.

Unless you've recently moved into a new construction home, chances are good that if your home

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The former fireplace in this home was a 1970s design with a mirror and dated stone columns. The new design adds a pop out behind the fireplace, borrowing space from the exterior to allow the fireplace and inset shelves to make a bolder, seamless impression. Natural stone better reflects its surroundings and a screen resembling flowing sea kelp is a nod to its coastal location.

## EMBRACING, UPDATING THE 'TV DINNER'

Eating in front of your favorite show easy with the right setup, furniture

BY STACEY LASTOE

There are countless shows and movies to binge these days. So, it's time to take a plate and a beverage into the living room to catch up on last year's obsessions and to cultivate new ones.

"The concept of watching television while you eat, first of all, of course has been happening since the invention of television," said Laura Shapiro, author of "Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America."

Eating in front of the TV got a huge boost from a company called Swanson in the 1950s. Although Swanson wasn't the first company to create compartmentalized aluminum tray dinners, in a "stroke of marketing genius," Swanson coined the phrase "TV dinner," Shapiro said. The old-school TV trays that went hand in hand with those TV dinners can feel too stuffy for



CLARK HODGIN NYT

Dean McRobie and Kristen Meinzer of Brooklyn, N.Y., ditched their dining room table after accepting that they preferred eating dinner on the couch while watching a show.

some these days. Take a look at how these couples make sure they are as comfortable as they can be.

**A coffee table for two**

When Kristen Meinzer and Dean McRobie, both in their 40s, bought their apartment in the

New York City borough of Brooklyn six years ago, they were newlyweds who aspired to be the kind of people who ate dinner together at the dining room table.

So they bought a dining room table. But after years of neglect, that particular piece of furniture

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## INDOOR, OUTDOOR PLANTS TO GET TO KNOW THIS SUMMER

Use warm temperatures, abundant light of longer days to your advantage

BY SARAH LYON

If summer's abundance of green and sunlight have you wanting to become more of a plant person, we're here to help. Read on for expert tips to keep top of mind before you grab those potting gloves.

**Building out your garden**

Summer is an excellent time to get your gardening on, even as a novice. You can start with a backyard full of florals or a cluster of plants that can double as cooking ingredients.

**Focus on plants that support pollinators:** These plants will do good and look lovely in your yard. "Many of our native pollinators are in decline, and providing them with sources of nectar and pollen is one step we can take toward supporting them," says Jessica Walliser,

author of gardening books, including "Plant Partners: Science-Based Companion Planting Strategies for the Vegetable Garden." She suggests starting with North American native perennials — plants that will live for several years — including coneflowers, perennial sunflowers and milkweeds.

Tara Nolan, author of "Gardening Your Front Yard: Projects and Ideas for Big and Small Spaces," joined a native-plant-of-the-month club last year. Many plant retailers offer this as an option for indoor and outdoor plants; some, such as the Urban Organic Gardener, send seeds, so you can grow food year-round. "This introduced me to a variety of plants from my region that are perfect for attracting pollinators to my garden," says Nolan, who runs the website [savvygardening.com](http://savvygardening.com) alongside Walliser and fellow gardening expert Niki Jabbour.

**Grow herbs and other edible plants:** Why not charm your alfresco dinner companions with a homemade

SEE PLANTS • E3

# QUALITY PLAYER IS KEY TO TAKING YOUR VINYL FOR A SPIN

Protect investment, get best sound with good equipment

BY LAURA DAILY

For the first time since 1987, vinyl albums are out-selling CDs and, like many other people, I find myself in the market for a record player. My mom recently announced that she wants to play her vintage John Denver albums and, unfortunately, we got rid of our old Sony stereo ages ago.

In theory, it's a simple task: Walk into a store and choose a player that you like and that fits your budget. But shopping for an all-in-one player or multicomponent system can feel akin to diving down an audio-techno rabbit hole. The insider lingo, such as counterweight, cartridge, preamp and rumble rating, is enough to make your head spin.

It doesn't have to be complicated, though. You don't need to spend a bundle to get a player of high enough quality that it doesn't skip or, worse, damage your records, says Quinn Theis, a vinyl specialist at Twist & Shout, one of Denver's oldest music stores. His advice is to research the basics, assess your needs and then find a retailer with knowledgeable staff.

## Know your terminology

Many people use the terms record player and turntable interchangeably, but they aren't the same thing. What most of us consider a record player is a compact "suitcase," an all-in-one portable player that includes a turntable, tonearm (the moving arm with a stylus on one end) and built-in speakers. You



GETTY IMAGES

Going to a music store with knowledgeable staff can help you find the best record player for your buck.

can find them at big box retailers or bookstores, often in a variety of colors.

A turntable, on the other hand, comprises the spinning platter and tonearm, and is just one component of a music system. It requires the addition of a preamp (to boost the sound signal from the turntable to a speaker) and speakers that plug into a jack.

Records should spin smoothly, so pay attention to the cartridge and counterweight. The cartridge holds the stylus or needle, which translates the grooves of a record into a signal that can become sound. Most suitcase models have a nonreplaceable ceramic cartridge, which can exert a lot of downforce

on the vinyl.

"If a record is precious to you, you want a lighter, moving magnetic cartridge to reduce the possibility of wear on the grooves," says David Ireland, head of global marketing and partnerships at turntable manufacturer Victrola.

The counterweight sits at the back of the tonearm. You need the right weight for the tonearm to track properly. Too much and it will damage your record, too little and it will pop out of the grooves, says Theis, who recommends an adjustable counterweight. That allows you to set the tonearm to the proper tracking force. You'll find plenty of online videos to explain the process.

Cheap players won't track or stay in the groove, especially on new albums, which are heavier than their vintage counterparts. "If there's no option to manually tweak the arm, then you can't play your record," he says.

Then there's the rumble rating, essentially how much vibration a turntable can withstand from an outside source before the vibration becomes audible through the speakers. The lower the number, the better the rating, says Thomas Rasmussen, owner of Rasmussen Turntable Repair in Corcoran, Minn. A turntable rated at -60, for example, is much better than one rated -30.

"If you take a cheap,

lighter turntable and jump next to it, it will skip, as it has a lower rumble rating," he says. "Whereas a heavier turntable can have someone jump next to it without any skipping or changes in sound." Rumble ratings are listed on the player label or in its specifications.

## Let the vinyl guide your choice

Are you a vinyl nut who's serious about sound or just someone who wants to listen to a cache of albums you found in the attic? An entry-level record player starts at about \$120 and will sound fine to the casual listener, says Ireland. "There are cheaper ones, but they really are novelty items, likely to break and

can't be fixed," says Theis.

Those planning on listening to records frequently may want to invest a bit more in a turntable system. A basic turntable should cost about \$200 to \$250. New speakers range from \$150 to \$200, though you might be able to find a set of decent ones for less at a thrift store or garage sale. Just be sure they work before buying.

## Get sound advice

Ask the pros at big box electronics stores such as Best Buy, or an independent record store that sells turntables, for their thoughts on equipment.

"Most indie stores have knowledgeable staff who can advise you on the best options for your budget," Ireland says.

A salesperson can demonstrate record player features and show you how to change the needle and adjust the counterweight, and they may even help you set up the components, says Theis.

## You get what you pay for

New records run around \$30 on average, so spending \$400 for a higher quality system is worth it to protect your investment in vinyl over time. And be wary of record players that look pretty. Sure, they may go with your decor, but a cheap player can trash a vinyl album after five to 10 plays. Stay away from no-name brands at prices that seem too good to be true. Spending even \$50 to \$100 more will net you a better player and a better experience.

"The right system can make the difference between just sound and how the record was intended to sound," Theis says.

Daily is a freelance writer. This article appeared in The Washington Post.

# HEARTH

## Some areas limit use of wood-burning fireplaces

FROM E1 is more than 15 or 20 years old and has a fireplace, it's likely to be wood-burning (even if it has a gas insert). And its facade may appear too dated for today's sleeker styles. Think heavy red brick or bulky, rustic rock that makes you think it's ready for climbing instead of lighting.

"We still see a lot of brick in houses we're asked to redesign," Pinto said. "A lot of people want to get rid of the brick for a more updated look."

But another complaint she hears is whether the old fireplace is functioning correctly: Is it letting too much smoke in the house, or is it even radiating enough heat into the room?

"It's more than just an ambiance thing," she added. "A lot of people want to feel cozy next to a fire, and it's just not hot enough. You'd think wood-burning fireplaces would generate a lot of heat, but the way that a chimney works, heat rises, and with a wood-burning fireplace the chimney pulls it up and out so it's not as hot as you think it's going to be."

As romantic as a wood-burning fireplace may seem, it's not only inefficient if you're trying to heat a room: It's also an environmental and health hazard. In 2021, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued an update to its 2017 National Emissions Inventory. It noted that wood-burning devices, including fireplaces, are significant sources of air pollution in the U.S., emitting large amounts of fine particulate matter, called PM2.5, volatile organic compounds, and hazardous air pollutants that the EPA noted are known to contribute to "poor human health, air quality, and visibility." The EPA explained that in addition to PM2.5, wood smoke contains several toxic air pollutants, including benzene, formaldehyde, acrolein and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons.

In other words, it may smell cozy, but it's not good for your health.

Consequently, pointed out Eli Cendejas, operations manager at Fireplaces Plus, states and municipalities — and even some homeowners associations — have banned the use of or



NATALIA ROBERT FOR BLYTHE INTERIORS

The original electric insert was kept for this fireplace, which is updated with fun tile in a herringbone pattern and a rustic mantel.

construction of wood-burning fireplaces and even gas fireplaces, allowing only electric. In San Diego, however, the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District's public information officer Melina Meza said that they have no rule that addresses fireplace usage because, "there isn't a high usage in San Diego." That doesn't mean some local municipalities haven't instituted them.

What many homeowners are opting for these days are gas and electric models. Lynn Siemer, director of design at Blythe Interiors, said that most of their clients are converting their gas and wood-burning fireplaces to electric.

"Electric inserts have come a long way and are easy to install, take up less space and can be controlled smartly and remotely," she explained. "And clients want something that looks as real as possible. Plus, they feel they'll use them more because all they need is a remote to turn them on and off."

Siemer also pointed out another potential benefit for people who want to have a TV over the fireplace.

"What's really nice about an electric fireplace is that we can both lower the mantel and the TV because

there's no heat issue," she explained.

And some designers have set soundbars inside faux fireplace mantels, no longer worrying about heat issues.

Electric fireplaces don't produce real flames, said Cendejas, although they create the illusion of flickering flames using a spinning light refractor or flame filament that bounces light from a light bulb, often an LED.

Some models include a heater as well.

"Some do have a heater, which is basically a 1,500-watt heater that's designed to heat up about 5,000 square feet, depending on the manufacturer," he said.

Cendejas explained that electric inserts can be inserted into an existing fireplace, but that requires an electrician to run power to the inside of the firebox. If the firebox has a gas line, that will need to be capped off. And, he added, the top of the chimney must be sealed to make sure no rainwater drops onto the electric fireplace.

In terms of design, they're available in a variety of styles and can be installed on walls that didn't previously have a fireplace.

Gas fireplaces can create a cozy fire — just using a

realistic-looking ceramic log or other media like tempered glass rocks or faux pebbles. You can even add geometric shapes, cast iron fire jacks, and lava rock. And gas fireplaces can be controlled with the touch of a switch, your thermostat, or a remote control. There's no sweeping up ashes. There's no smoke. They actually do produce flames — and heat using a blower and heat release system. Because they produce heat, they require sealed glass to cover the unit.

"On top of that should be a mesh screen or 'double glass,'" explained Pinto. "The mesh is a code requirement because the glass gets really hot. Double glass, which is more expensive, eliminates the look of the mesh."

"It's a way of preventing you or a child or a pet from getting burned touching that hot glass."

Cendejas noted that you may need to have a gas line installed if you don't have one or a line moved or re-done if it's not in the right place or not up to code.

Pinto suggested looking into heat management technologies, which can draw heat from the fireplace outside to reduce wall temperatures above and

around the fireplace.

"If it's a unit you're going to use on a regular basis and is a focal point that you want to place a TV on, then heat management is something you certainly should consider," she said. "And those units cost more money."

With these options, there's still the matter of styling.

For a gas fireplace without heat management, Pinto suggested that the best surface for a fireplace would be small-scale tiles, like a mosaic because the multiple grout lines can expand and contract without cracking, unlike oversized tiles or even plaster.

She added, though, that clients often want their fireplace to be a focal point in a room, which can be achieved with scale, materials, or design. When choosing materials, the trend is toward oversize tile, tile with the appearance of stone, or natural stones like limestone.

Siemer has found that she loves to transform former brick, stone, or 1980s travertine tile surrounds with large format, textured tile; on-trend subway tiles in herringbone; or unique tiles.

"We often add a custom, clean-line wood mantel," she said, noting

that her clients often go for minimalist.

"We have clients that have a linear electric fireplace, the TV above it, and drywall around it and that's it. So, it's a very minimalist look," she said.

And she pointed out that a lot of builders placed fireplaces off center in the late '90s and early 2000s with a big cutout above for TVs.

"People are hiring us to move them, just demo the entire wall and start over," she said.

And if the replacement is what's called a "pancake fireplace," meaning an electric fireplace that's only 8 inches deep, it can go where a fireplace wasn't before with some ease. Additional styling could include cutting a niche into the wall for a TV so it blends seamlessly with the wall.

Cendejas suggested that any modifications involving gas or electrical work should be done by a contractor, who should also pull local permits if they're required.

And, he emphasized, before buying anything, if you live in a community with an homeowners association, make sure you follow its rules, as well as any municipal regulations.

Golden is a San Diego freelance writer and blogger.