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Snow Forecast? Set Up the Patio

By HILARY STOUT

IN the cycle of the seasons, now is a time of longing — for backyard sunbathing, for cocktails on the patio, for puttering in the garden, and for the distant time when all those activities will be possible again.

And for those who live in climates where all that is still possible, it is high gloating season, a time to feel superior to those of us who have been slogging through slush, picking our way across the ice, heaving snow with our shovels, condemned to wait out the frigid months inside our four walls.

Then there is another type of person, a rarer breed.

Even in this winter of record-challenging cold, there are those who refuse to cower before the elements and retreat indoors. They never shroud the grill or store the patio furniture. They are exhilarated to relax on the deck in the chill. And they find a special beauty as they gaze at the slate-gray sky on a winter morning.

As the following hardy souls prove, people can diverge sharply in their reasons for indulging in an alfresco way of life. For one man, the spur is football, the chance to prop his TV on a patio wall for his weekly winter-

SHIRT SLEEVES Snowdrifts rarely deter Courtney Wilson, of Westport, Conn., from basking at his stone fireplace, or watching football, on his patio.

time ritual. Another has created a year-round garden, bountiful not just in summer but in winter, too. For a third, a recent transplant to the city, the goal is to preserve a suburban lifestyle — grilling, hosting parties and even working up plans to build a backyard ice rink.

FOOTBALL AND FLANNEL

From September to early February, Courtney Wilson's Sundays are devoted to football. Starting at around noon, he heads for the couch.

He gets a good fire going in the fireplace, makes sure the fridge is stocked with beer, and settles — usually horizontally — in front of his 45-inch flat screen with his remote and his laptop at arm's reach (the better for following multiple games and his fantasy football league).

It is a scene played out, for better or

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SUZANNE DeCHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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worse, in countless living rooms and family rooms. Except that Mr. Wilson, who lives in Westport, Conn., where the snowfall this winter totaled more than 30 inches even before yesterday's storm, does much of his football-viewing, beer-drinking and fire-building on the backyard patio.

When Mr. Wilson, who runs his own insurance business, and his wife, Susan, built a patio last year, their aim was to make it an extension of their home — an outdoor room of sorts that they could enjoy no matter the season. “We don't really like the heat — we go to San Francisco in August,” Mrs. Wilson, a Wall Street banker, said on a day the snow was so deep it nearly covered the outdoor ottoman.

So the couple built a big stone fireplace in one corner of the patio, flanked by sitting walls that are a perfect place to set up the TV for all those hours

KEBABS IN JANUARY

“You have to extend the season,” said Scott Walsh of Long Island City, Queens. His backyard wintertime plans include drinking cocoa, building an igloo and an ice rink, and grilling for guests.



ABOVE, FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES; LEFT, EVAN SUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; BELOW, SUZANNE D'CHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES



He decided to make the penthouse his city home. There, he set out to create a different type of garden, an urban vegetable and fruit garden that would change with the seasons and be enjoyed year-round.

“All gardeners are obsessed about ‘year-round,’” Mr. Rich said. “A true gardener understands that when the flowers are in bloom — that’s nothing.” He hired landscapers and gardeners to help realize his vision. In summer the 2,200-square-foot stretch is bursting with berries and peaches, tomatoes and all manner of vegetables. But in winter, the harvests continue.

One recent afternoon, as a fire burned welcomingly in his living room, Mr. Rich, a woodsman's jacket over his suit and tie, tramped through the snow in his perfectly shined black leather shoes, surveying his garden. Parsley peeked through the white snow, and the broccoli and purple cauliflower were still flowering. He proudly displayed his new cold frame, a mini-greenhouse of sorts where tiny sprouts of lettuce, spinach and carrots poked through the rich, warmed soil.

On many mornings, Mr. Rich, wearing a coat, sits outside under a pergola with a cup of coffee and the newspaper. Then he reaches for his garden clippers.

“A winter garden is about texture and color,” he said, describing the varying greens, rusts, browns and mauves of his evergreens and other dwarf trees. An Eastern white pine, he said, gesturing to one of his trees, has long, soft needles, while a red pine is prickly and cascading, and a Japanese white pine has delicate tufts.

“Almost every plant has to carry its weight in the winter,” Mr. Rich said. “It has to have interesting bark, berries.” After all, he added, “You don't just say, ‘I don't care what it looks like in the winter, I'm not going out there.’”

SUBURBAN LIFE, CITY VIEW

When Scott Walsh decided to move to Long Island City, Queens, from the New Jersey suburbs last year, he figured he could handle the transition to a one-bedroom apartment from a three-bedroom house. “But,” he said, “my No. 1 thought was I couldn't lose my outdoor space.”

And so he found, and spent the extra money for, a rare combination: an 840-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment with a 1,400-square-foot backyard, just across the East River from Manhattan at a high-rise condo called the View. But limiting use of the space to warm-weather months simply would not do.

“You pay such a premium for these yards, you have to extend the season,” he said, smiling.

So Mr. Walsh, an architect and marketer for a real estate firm, has made his outdoor space a homage to winter. He begins most of his days in it, drinking hot cocoa, eating oatmeal and checking e-mail in one of two teak rocking chairs beneath a propane gas lamp. A flame in a glass fireplace fueled by ethanol dances delicately above a stainless steel surface. The flame is particularly beautiful on a winter night, he said, when the snow is falling.

On a bright, 25-degree morning last Saturday, Mr. Walsh busied himself outside, arranging hedge branches painted a winter white in a new planter. Then, on his natural gas Weber grill, he cooked some chicken kebabs for lunch.

But Mr. Walsh has far grander visions for his winter space. A hockey-loving co-worker has convinced him that the flat expanse of grass would make a perfect ice rink. “I think I'm going to try it,” he said.

He would also love to build an igloo in one corner of the yard — a project he started a couple of weeks ago by packing snow into a plastic mold to create foot-long bricks. A day of heavy rain ruined those efforts, but he was heartened by a subsequent snowfall and hopes to begin anew this week.

“I think it would be beautiful,” he said. His ultimate fantasy is to add a hot tub, so he can see the steam rising from the snow.

Mr. Walsh is particularly captivated by the aesthetics of winter. He talks of planting birch and juniper trees. He is fascinated with the work of Sergio López-Piñero, an assistant professor of architecture at the State University at Buffalo, who has turned snowbanks into landscape art. He is also excited by the prospect of reupholstering the patio furniture.

“Outdoor fabrics have come a long way,” he said. “They can now do velvet.”

Mr. Walsh often invites friends over for meals cooked on the grill. Sitting around the outdoor table can be a tad chilly, so they usually gather on the outdoor sofa and rocking chairs, near the fireplace and the propane lamp.

“The difference between summer entertaining and winter entertaining is less people,” he said. But, he reasoned, that works out perfectly. “Winter,” he said, “is a more intimate season anyway.”

of football, not to mention movies under the stars. There is also an outdoor kitchen to one side with a granite-topped island, a small refrigerator, a bar and a large propane grill — on which they cook at least two times a week, whatever the temperature.

A sectional with outdoor cushions and the ottoman are arranged in front of the fireplace, and (very important) there's a high-definition cable hookup so that, when they carry their set outside, they can get the full Direct TV football package. On football Sundays, Mr. Wilson likes to grill sausages, and sometimes takes a break to play Ping-Pong at an outdoor table with his 9-year-old son, Tyler. He keeps warm with the fireplace, a propane gas lamp and, if need be, another fire in a fire pit.

Even when the temperature is below freezing, Mr. Wilson usually wears nothing heavier than a flannel shirt. “It's important to be able to go out there without a coat,” he said, explaining that it wouldn't truly be an extension of his home if he had to bundle up to use it.

He is not alone in this extreme approach to backyard living. On Christmas Day, when temperatures were in the 30s, his wife's Uncle Bob, who is in his 70s, joined him on the patio to watch basketball and drink martinis in their shirt sleeves. A few weeks earlier, about 100 people attended the Wilsons' Christmas party, with a good half of the guests spending most of the time on the patio.

But the Wilsons will probably shelve their plans for an outdoor Super Bowl party. It has nothing to do with the weather — much to Mr. Wilson's dismay, the New York Jets lost to the Pittsburgh Steelers last Sunday and will not be playing.

PARSLEY IN THE SNOW

“I love sitting out in the snow, drinking a Scotch and watching the sunset,” said Fred Rich. This he

does while stretched out on a bench in his rooftop garden overlooking the Statue of Liberty.

Mr. Rich, a partner in the prestigious law firm Sullivan & Cromwell, is a serious gardener. He has a weekend house in Garrison, N.Y., with a 12-acre garden on the banks of the Hudson that draws admirers from far away. But during the week, at least until recently, he lived in a condo at the Ritz Battery Park City near his downtown Manhattan office.

When a new condominium building called the Visionaire opened downtown a couple of years ago, however, Mr. Rich was taken with the green roof — a roof covered in soil — outside a penthouse on the 35th floor.

COLD HARVEST “A winter garden is about texture and color,” said Fred Rich, above left, who grows evergreens, and parsley and carrots, in his Manhattan penthouse garden. Courtney Wilson, right, grills sausages on football Sundays in Connecticut.

