

CHARLOTTE URBAN

# HOME

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CELEBRATING INSPIRATIONAL DESIGN AND PERSONAL STYLE





Now that it's finally summer, we can't wait to throw open the doors and host a killer shindig in the backyard.

By Nancy Atkinson

ADVICE FROM HOME DESIGN EXPERT and party host extraordinaire Kevin Sharkey, senior vice president and executive editorial director of decorating and executive creative director of merchandising for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc., combined with our own tips for outdoor entertaining means that this article is packed with fantastic ideas for an easy outdoor event you and your guests will always remember. Check out our roadmap for a fabulous outdoor soiree, taking you from planning to execution with a few simple steps.

**Select a Theme**

Whether it's a rustic cookout or a glamorous cocktail party, select your theme and go with it. Every element of your event should carry the theme forward, from the table setting to lights, furniture, music and menu. Your theme can be inspired by anything you love: a happy color palette or pattern, your favorite summer holiday, a time period (think

70s glam or 50s beach party), or a nostalgic theme from your childhood.

Summer holidays like Memorial Day, Labor Day and the Fourth of July are easy to execute with all the traditional favorites and just scream Americana. Consider also, however, a Mexican fiesta. It's a fun, colorful and inexpensive theme, not to mention a good excuse to serve margaritas. Dress the table with burlap layered over a red tablecloth. A large sombrero doubles as the centerpiece and cupcake holder when you sit them inside the hat brim.

A White Hot Summer Night party is the perfect idea for laid back elegance. Serve champagne, white wine, cheese trays and light bites. Set the table with crisp white and natural linens surrounded with a multitude of white candles in small votives. Fill inexpensive glasses with water, float white flowers on top and use your best china.

Kevin suggests an outdoor summer movie party, one of his favorites. With a projector attached to your laptop, screen favorite classic or home movies onto an inexpensive white sheet or large canvas dropcloth.



Gray Walker Designs via Dustin Peck Photography



Cluney Photo



Best Impressions Catering



Gabriel Ryan Photography

Seat guests on bales of hay, blankets or lawn chairs and serve fresh popcorn, lemonade and other finger foods for a fun and memorable evening with friends.

### Comfortable Guests = Happy Guests

You may be lucky enough to have an established outdoor living space with a kitchen, fire pit and plush outdoor living furniture. But even if you only have a picnic table under a favorite tree, you can create a magical setting for your party when you pull the details together.

Kevin suggests making sure you have enough seating for all your guests to be comfortable. "Outdoor furniture should be as comfortable as your indoor furnishings," he says. "Carry the colors and style from your home's interior to the outside." Making your outdoor space an extension of your home means that guests will be just as comfortable in your backyard as they are in your living room.

He recommends an all-weather transitional style wicker for seating that complements any architecture, noting that the Charlottetowne line from Martha Stewart is an excellent option. When you need extra seats, folding bistro chairs and small tables are a perfect, comfortable and easy addition.

You can also repurpose indoor furniture for your outdoor event, adding style and optimum charm to the space. Bring benches, stools or club chairs outside, or cover a cot with pillows to make it a settee. Make sure you have comfy cushions on all your seating, encouraging guests to linger.

### Decorate a Colorful Table

Forget paper napkins and plastic utensils and go for easy elegance with unbreakable melamine plates and serving pieces used with your regular flatware. You can also mix and match vintage dishes scored at flea markets and garage sales for a shabby chic look that brings whimsy or romance to the event.

Kevin likes to use Martha's red, white and blue Star Spangled melamine collection year-round. "Build your collection of melamine the same way you would your indoor china," says Kevin. "Always mix it up when you're entertaining. It's much more interesting."

Decorate the table and the seating areas with potted plants and flowers. Make a centerpiece with individual small pots of fragrant herbs and let each guest pick their favorite to take home.

### Create Fun Food and Drink Stations

Set up tables in separate areas, with drinks in one spot and desserts in another, to keep your guests moving and mingling.

Move a piece of furniture outside to create a drink station on a porch or patio. This serve-yourself beverage station should be separate from the food to allow guests to pour drinks and socialize before and after dinner. Stock the bar with cups, straws (to double as stirrers) and plenty of ice, pimento cheese and other nibbles. An urn, galvanized bucket or even a wheelbarrow can be used as an ice chest to hold bottles of beer,

wine, lemonade and sparkling water.

"Serve a good cocktail," says Kevin, whose go-to party cocktail is the Aperol Spritz. "Make a big batch of the cocktail and serve it in a large pitcher. Also have a big beautiful pitcher of very cold water with fresh, sliced cucumbers and a bowl of punch with large pieces of fresh fruit floating in it for those who don't drink alcohol."

### Keep Food Simple

Keep the food simple and make as many items as possible in advance so you can spend more time with family and friends. Think salads, fresh fruit and cold drinks. Keep salads chilled by putting the bowl into a larger bowl filled with ice and a little water. "For me it's all about the presentation," says Kevin. "I splurge on desserts, appetizers and alcohol, but happily serve homemade dips with bagged chips."

If budget allows, consider hiring a caterer for your outdoor event. Look for caterers that offer set-up and take-down to minimize effort on your part, and partner with one that offers menus that are ideal for outdoor entertaining or that go with your chosen theme. You can still keep food simple with a caterer by choosing lighter fare like grilled skewers, fruit displays, hot or cold specialty dips and toast points, and even passed hors d'oeuvres in lieu of a full spread.

### Consider the Music

"Take the music outside if it's appropriate and it will add ambiance," says Kevin. "If it is a nuisance or will disturb the neighbors, however, then it's best to avoid." Wondering what to play? He recommends Williams Sonoma's CD series made for cocktails, dinner and dancing.

Of course, if you can find music that complements your theme, then consider adding it to create a well-rounded atmosphere. Think Ella Fitzgerald for an evening outdoor dinner party or mellow Dave Matthews and classic Fleetwood Mac for a casual afternoon cookout.

### Light the Night

The sky's the limit when it comes to your outdoor lighting choices. You can hang an inexpensive chandelier from your giant oak tree, string lights over the table and hang mason jars with lit candles. Or, consider Kevin's suggestion to hang strings of lights vertically, from the porch ceiling to add elegance. If you need to run cords, cut wire hangers and bend them into a u-shaped peg (like croquet wickets but only an inch or two wide) then arc them over the cords and hammer them into the ground.

Summer parties should be fun and you can always bend the rules a little, but they should still be pretty, advises Kevin. "There's no reason stacks of glasses and napkins can't be pretty," he says. "I overcompensate by going heavy on the number of things I need. I put out giant bowls of chips and dip and overstock the bar. No matter the details, that always sets us up for a fun evening."



Cool down with  
this festive  
summer cocktail

## Aperol Spritz

Ice

2 ounces Aperol (an Italian aperitif)

Soda water, chilled

Orange slice for garnish

Fill an old fashioned glass with ice.

Add Aperol, Prosecco,  
and soda water to fill.

Garnish with orange slice.



Gray Walker Designs

## Kevin's 8 Keys to a Successful Summer Party

1. Provide comfortable seating
2. Use personal touches like outdoor drapes
3. Light each area accordingly using votives, lanterns, string lights
4. Use music when appropriate – try summer entertaining CDs
5. Decorate with potted plants or herbs
6. Have a sack race and play croquet
7. Serve a good cocktail and a non-alcoholic punch
8. Give guests a disposable camera when they arrive so they can take a bit of the party home with them

### RESOURCES

Blue Haven Pools & Spas .....	704-889-1300 .....	www.bluehaven.com
Carolina Outdoor Concepts .....	704-625-0267 .....	www.carolinaoutdoorconcepts.com
Morgan Landscape Group .....	704-588-2292 .....	www.morganlandscapegroup.com
Oasis Pools Plus .....	704-542-5300 .....	www.oasispoolsplus.com
Pool By Design .....	704-3DESIGN .....	www.poolbydesign.com
ShadeTree Cool Living .....	800-894-3801 .....	www.shadetreecanopies.com
Sunmar Construction .....	704-930-1250 .....	www.sunmarconstruction.com
Summer Classics .....	704-372-0095 .....	www.summerclassics.com
The Firehouse Casual Living Store .....	704-598-8787 .....	www.fhcasual.com
The Hearth & Patio .....	704-909-2420 .....	www.thehearthandpatio.com
The Stone Man .....	704-616-7948 .....	www.stonemanrocks.com

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