



FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

THE BACKYARD INVESTMENT GUIDE

How to set a realistic budget, understand return on investment and spend where it matters most.

PLAN SMARTER.	SPEND SMARTER.	BUILD BETTER.
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Real-world guidance for patios, decks, pavilions, fire features, outdoor kitchens, landscape upgrades and complete backyard renovations.

By Keith Morris | Landscape designer, builder and owner
30+ years in the dirt

Start with the right question

The first question is not, “How much does a patio cost?” It is, “What do I want this backyard to do for my life - and what am I comfortable investing to make that happen?”

Backyard projects are not one-size-fits-all products. The same square footage can produce very different prices depending on access, excavation, drainage, walls, utilities, structure, material quality and finish details. A smart investment starts by defining the experience, understanding the site and building a realistic plan before construction begins.

THE TWO RETURNS ON A BACKYARD PROJECT

Resale return is the portion of your investment a future buyer may recognize in the value or marketability of the home.

Lifestyle return is the use, comfort, beauty, connection and time at home the project gives you while you own it.

Neither return should be treated as a guarantee. Your home, neighborhood, project quality, timing and local market all matter. The goal is not to chase a perfect percentage. The goal is to make an informed investment that fits your property and your life.

A good project should answer three questions:

- Will we use it often?
- Does it solve a real problem or improve how the property functions?
- Is the level of investment appropriate for this home, neighborhood and ownership timeline?

What ROI really means outdoors

Outdoor ROI is broader than a simple resale calculation. A beautifully designed space can make a home easier to enjoy and easier to sell - but the projects with the highest homeowner satisfaction are not always the projects with the highest estimated cost recovery.

THE RESEARCH IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

The National Association of REALTORS® 2023 Outdoor Features report found an overall homeowner Joy Score of 9.7 out of 10. After completing an outdoor project, 68% of owners reported a greater desire to be home and 60% reported increased enjoyment of their home.

That is lifestyle ROI: value you receive every week, not only when the property is sold.

Representative cost-recovery estimates from the same national study

PROJECT	EST. COST RECOVERY*
Landscape maintenance	104%
Overall landscape upgrade	100%
Outdoor kitchen	100%
New patio	95%
Fire feature	56%

*National survey estimates for specifically defined, standard-quality projects. They are not promises and should not be applied directly to a custom project or local quote.

Use ROI data as perspective, not a price list. A \$15,000 national outdoor-kitchen example is not comparable to a custom covered kitchen with masonry, premium appliances, utilities, cabinetry and structural work. Scope matters.

Four backyard investment tiers

These planning tiers help you think about scope. They are not estimates. Western Pennsylvania access, slopes, drainage, retaining walls, utilities, permits and material choices can move any project above or below a range.

TIER 1 | UNDER \$15,000

Focused improvement

Planting refresh, lighting accents, a small seating area, drainage correction, lawn repair or a single targeted upgrade.

Best return: visible improvement, solved problems and daily curb or backyard enjoyment.

TIER 2 | \$15,000 - \$40,000

One strong outdoor room

A modest patio or deck, fire-pit area, planting and lighting package, or a well-defined phase of a larger master plan.

Best return: a useful gathering space with a clear purpose and controlled scope.

TIER 3 | \$40,000 - \$80,000

Layered outdoor living

A larger premium patio or deck with walls, steps, fire feature, lighting, landscaping and selected utilities.

Best return: better flow, longer seasonal use and a more complete transformation.

TIER 4 | \$80,000 - \$150,000+

Complete backyard environment

Covered structures, outdoor kitchens, media walls, extensive hardscape, grading, drainage, retaining walls, electrical, plumbing and full landscape integration.

Best return: a cohesive extension of the home designed for long-term living.

Where the money really goes

Homeowners naturally focus on visible materials. In reality, much of a durable project investment is underground, behind the finish or tied to safe construction.

THE INVISIBLE WORK IS NOT WASTED MONEY

Excavation, base preparation, drainage, footers, framing, reinforcement, utility trenches and waterproofing are what protect the finished space. Cutting these items to preserve a decorative upgrade usually creates the wrong kind of savings.

BUDGET CATEGORY	PLANNING TARGET
Design, engineering and permits	5 - 12%
Site work, access, drainage and utilities	15 - 30%
Primary structure and hardscape	35 - 55%
Features, finishes and furnishings	15 - 30%
Contingency reserve	10 - 15%

These percentages are conversation starters, not formulas. A steep property may require a much larger site-work share. A simple flat site may direct more of the budget toward the finished space.

Protect first: drainage, structure, circulation, safety and code compliance.

Upgrade second: surface materials, appliances, decorative features and accessories.

Spend where it matters most

1. A master plan

Even when you build in phases, plan the whole property first. This prevents the future pavilion from fighting the patio layout or a new wall from blocking drainage.

2. Water management

Surface water and subsurface water can damage hardscape, structures, lawn and planting. Drainage should be designed with the project, not added after a failure.

3. Comfortable scale

A space that is too small will never function well. Size furniture, circulation paths, grills, doors and gathering zones before setting final dimensions.

4. Structure and base

Footers, framing, aggregate base and compaction are not glamorous, but they determine whether the project stays level, safe and durable.

5. Useful infrastructure

Conduit, sleeves, gas, electric, water and low-voltage wiring are easier to install before the finished surfaces are complete.

6. Cohesive materials

Choose a limited palette that fits the home. More materials and more features do not automatically create better design.

How to phase without paying twice

Phasing can be a smart financial strategy when each phase follows one master plan. Randomly adding features over time often creates demolition, mismatched elevations, blocked access and duplicated mobilization costs.

A SMART PHASE ORDER

Phase 1: survey, design, grading, drainage and underground utilities

Phase 2: retaining walls, primary structures, patio or deck

Phase 3: kitchen, fire, lighting, railings and built-ins

Phase 4: planting, lawn restoration, furnishings and finishing details

Ask before approving any phase:

- Will future equipment still have access without crossing finished work?
- Are sleeves and utilities being installed now for later features?
- Are elevations set for the complete plan, not only today's phase?
- Will later work require removing caps, pavers, plants or railings?
- Can this phase stand on its own if the next phase is delayed?

The least expensive first phase is not always the lowest-cost long-term path. Sequence matters.

Your investment snapshot

Complete this page before requesting pricing. It will help a designer or contractor understand what matters, where you have flexibility and whether the scope aligns with your investment comfort zone.

How long do we expect to own this home?

Maximum comfortable investment

Additional contingency reserve

Top three ways we want to use the space

Our must-have feature

Our nice-to-have feature

Problem the project must solve

Feature we could add in a later phase

What kind of return matters most?

☐ Daily use and comfort	☐ Entertaining
☐ Resale appeal	☐ Lower maintenance
☐ Solving drainage or access	☐ Long-term family use

Budget mistakes that cost the most

Pricing before planning

A number without a defined scope is not a reliable budget. Different contractors may be pricing completely different projects.

Spending every dollar on the initial contract

Existing conditions can reveal surprises. Keep a real contingency outside the finish-upgrade wish list.

Choosing by total price alone

Compare excavation, base, drainage, structure, materials, quantities, permits, restoration and warranty - not only the bottom line.

Ignoring the house connection

Door thresholds, step counts, roof drainage, utilities and interior views shape the outdoor design.

Building too small

Reducing useful square footage may protect the budget on paper but produce a space that cannot fit furniture and circulation.

Adding features without hierarchy

A strong focal point and comfortable layout usually create more value than a crowded collection of expensive features.

THE MOST IMPORTANT BUDGET QUESTION

Where should I invest now so I do not have to build it twice?

Before you move forward

- ☐ I know how we want to use the space.
- ☐ I have a maximum comfortable investment and a separate contingency.
- ☐ I understand the site constraints: access, slope, drainage, utilities and permits.
- ☐ I have a plan for the complete property, even if construction will be phased.
- ☐ The proposed scope is detailed enough to compare honestly.
- ☐ I know what is included for lawn repair, cleaning and final walkthrough.
- ☐ I have checked references, insurance, warranty and change-order procedures.
- ☐ The project fits our ownership timeline and the value of the home.

ONE LAST THOUGHT

A backyard is not valuable because it contains the most features. It is valuable when the land, the home and the way you live all work together. Start with a plan. Protect the fundamentals. Spend with intention.

Built from real-world experience



I studied landscape architecture at Penn State, but the most important lessons came from more than 30 years turning plans into real projects. Water moves. Grades change. Materials vary. Budgets tighten. Good design has to survive all of it.

In The Dirt Design Co. creates straightforward resources that help homeowners plan smarter, ask better questions and make informed outdoor-living decisions.

KEEP DIGGING

Use this guide to start the conversation - then pair it with a site-specific design, qualified professionals and detailed written proposals before construction.

RESEARCH & IMPORTANT NOTES

National Association of REALTORS® and National Association of Landscape Professionals. 2023 Remodeling Impact Report: Outdoor Features.

nar.realtor/research-and-statistics/research-reports/remodeling-impact-report-outdoor-features

National Association of Home Builders. What Home Buyers Really Want / outdoor-feature summaries, including patios, exterior lighting and landscaping among frequently desired features.

nabh.org/news-and-economics

Disclaimer: This guide is for general educational and planning purposes only. It is not an appraisal, contractor estimate, engineering opinion, tax advice or guarantee of resale value. Costs and returns vary widely by location, site conditions, design, materials, quality, market and timing. Obtain local professional guidance before investing.

IN THE DIRT DESIGN CO.

Real-world knowledge. Better outdoor spaces.