



The great outdoors

High-performance fabrics evolve as retailers as well as consumers demand both fashion and function from their outdoor rooms.

by Jill C. Lafferty

The first La-Z-Boy was a folding wooden-slat porch chair designed for “nature’s way of reclining.” But when it was deemed too seasonal by a retailer, the two Michigan cousins who designed the chair agreed to upholster it for indoor use, and this icon of American home furnishings has held a beloved spot in front of fireplaces and televisions ever since.

Now, the La-Z-Boy recliner is headed back outdoors, albeit with high-performance upholstery in place of the wooden slats of yesteryear. What was deemed too seasonal 80 years ago is now exactly what consumers want: attractive, comfortable, and functional furniture for one of the hottest spaces in home design—the outdoor room.

“The outdoor furniture industry has been around a long time, but from a consumption standpoint, we are just entering the late adolescent phase of our industry’s growth,” says Christopher Carmicle, president of national accounts and the direct imports division for Brown Jordan International (BJI), Pompano Beach, Fla. La-Z-Boy Inc. has partnered with BJI to launch its first line of luxury outdoor furniture.

Two considerable things have fueled the popularity of outdoor rooms, Carmicle says. “First, retailers are doing a fantastic job showing consumers the multiple options that are available to them in furnishing the outdoor area. Second, media like DIY television, the Internet, and even direct mail catalogs have helped consumers use their imagination in

This double-chaise lounge from La-Z-Boy Inc. and Brown Jordan exemplifies the luxurious furnishings available for both residential and hospitality-sector outdoor rooms.

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their furnishing decisions of the outdoor room.”

Natalie Scott, vice president of customer development for Shuford Mills/Outdura, Hickory, N.C., says the outdoor room is not a short-lived trend.

“I think this is evident when looking through home magazines, designer show houses, new home construction, and renovations,” Scott says. “Whether it be a family dinner or a party with friends, the outdoor room has become an important gathering place. In some cases, the outdoor room usage is equal to that of the dining room, family, and kitchen.”

The functional requirements of fabrics used in outdoor settings have always included water repellency, UV-, stain- and mildew-resistance. More and more, however, homeowners are demanding outdoor furnishings that are as attractive as they are practical. In the 2006 Home Lifestyle Report by Laneventure of Conover, N.C., home décor tied with clothing, shoes, and accessories as the respondents’ top choice for expressing their personal style. The survey also found that:

- 75 percent of U.S. homeowners report that it is important that the outdoor area or living space works with their lifestyle.
- 61 percent said it is important to extend the living space and personality of their home to the outdoors.
- 44 percent update their outdoor rooms seasonally, just like their wardrobes.
- Homeowners with children are most likely to plan on making

a purchase to customize their outdoor living spaces.

“Consumers have come to the realization that the outdoor room of their home is the only room all of their neighbors can see without an invitation, so they are thinking about it as an expression of themselves,” Carmicle says.

Outdoor fabrics evolve

Barbeques and outdoor fireplaces have played a large part in fueling the popularity of outdoor rooms, but fabric plays an integral role in making the outdoor room practical, comfortable, and even luxurious. In addition to upholstered and sling-style furnishings, homeowners may consider screens, umbrellas, pillows, awnings and other shade options. Textiles for all of these outdoor room components have evolved to meet the needs of homeowners, even those in more extreme climates.

For example, fabric mills process the upholstery foam and fabric with anti-microbial agents within the finishing process to create a

water-resistant fabric surface, Carmicle explains. The foam on the inside of the cushion resists mold and mildew, and cushions dry quickly after a rain shower, standing up to the elements for years.

“For the high-end specialty sector, there are now pigments in printed goods that have evolved to increase the UV resistance by 100 percent,” he says. “Another example is that we are seeing many more evolved yarns, such as high-performance solution-dyed polyester and acrylic fabrics; [they] have a delicate hand but are durable enough to be utilized in the contract and hospitality applications.”

Carmicle gives two examples of fabrics developed to meet retailer and



La-Z-Boy Inc. and Brown Jordan (BJI) have partnered in 2007 to create La-Z-Boy's first line of luxury outdoor furniture. "As the outdoor segment increasingly becomes a fashion business, the textiles industry has answered the consumer demand and the innovation continues to evolve every year to the point that performance fabric has the look and feel of indoor goods," says BJI president Christopher Carmicle.

La-Z-Boy Inc./Brown Jordan

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consumer demands for outdoor furnishings that simulate the look and feel of indoor furniture while maintaining their outdoor performance.

“High-performance outdoor UltraLeather® is a great example,” he says. “A simulated leather product that has a high UV rating in a variety of colors. Bella-Dura™ is another—a high performance solution-dyed polyester with the specifications of a contract fabric.” (Note: UltraLeather is manufactured by Gulf Fabrics Inc. of Tampa, Fla.)

Glen Raven Custom Fabrics LLC, Glen Raven, N.C., introduced Sunbrella® performance fabrics for casual and outdoor furniture in the 1980s. These fabrics represented the first outdoor furniture fabrics that had a look and feel similar to cotton, yet were fade-resistant, easy to clean, and long-lasting, says furniture fabrics sales manager Suzie Roberts.

“The styling and sophistication of Sunbrella has steadily increased to the point today that you can have jacquards, chenille, and velvet fabrics that are suitable for use outdoors,” she says.

More extreme climates warrant the need for screen and shade material, not only to make the outdoor room more comfortable, but also to make the entire home more energy efficient, says Glenn Nichols, design manager for Twitchell Corp., Dothan, Ala. Twitchell developed its SuperScreen™ fabric for pool, patio, and porch enclosures.

“It is stronger than a fiberglass screen, yet has a fine denier yarn, blocking sunlight while not obstructing the homeowner’s view. The fine denier yarn also helps to make your outdoor room insect-free.”

Hugo Benitez, president and chairman of the IFAI Casual Furniture Fabrics Association, is the designed fabrics national market manager for PHIFER Inc. of Tuscaloosa, Ala. He says that adding screen porches and pool enclosures to outside living areas are good ways for homeowners to enjoy the outdoors while maintaining indoor comforts.

“Phifer’s screening offers improved outward visibility for the outdoor room, while also creating a sharp outward appearance for your home,” says Benitez. “It performs excellently on screen porches, windows, doors, or any spot with a great view. [Our firm’s] insect screening comes in a variety of colors and mesh sizes, down to the tiniest holes that prevent entry of even the smallest pests.”



Glen Raven Custom Fabrics LLC. (2)

Outdoor fireplaces, kitchens, and barbeques have driven the outdoor room trend, but high-performance fabrics have evolved to bring fashion and function together. These chairs feature Sunbrella fabric from Glen Raven Custom Fabrics LLC.

Fade-resistant fabrics designed for outdoor uses are increasingly finding a home indoors, as new home construction includes more natural light. “The line between indoor and outdoor décor is continuing to blur, primarily as a result of increasing style and sophistication of performance fabrics such as Sunbrella,” says sales manager Suzie Roberts. “Today, our furniture fabric offerings run the full gambit, from fabrics that are styled for outdoors, to fabrics styled for residential interiors, to fabrics that can be used inside or out.”



Phifertex Marquésa Blends from PHIFER Inc. do not absorb water and dry very quickly, making them resistant to mold and mildew growth. Woven to endure extreme weather conditions, the fabric is durable, fade-resistant, stain-resistant, and easy to clean.

Would you prefer indoor or outdoor seating?

Outdoor rooms aren't limited to residential construction—in fact, outdoor rooms in public spaces can be designed on a more lavish scale. Think outdoor dining and bars, cabanas, and poolside seating, to name a few examples.

“People expect to have the outdoor living ‘luxuries’ available to them when they travel, and even on a more grand scale,” says Nichols.

Having those luxuries on such an opulent scale requires greater effort on the part of manufacturers, because performance specifications in the hospitality industry are much higher than for residential markets.

“We've recently worked to improve our abrasion results, going back to the fiber,” says Scott of Shuford Mills. “By using a superior fiber, we are able to exceed 60,000 double rubs on our solids and stripes, which is double the requirement of this market segment.”

The popularity of patio dining has fueled the desire of restaurateurs to extend the outdoor dining season.

“Through the creative use of retractable covers made of Sunbrella fabrics, a growing number of restaurants are creating outdoor dining spaces that can be used year-round,” says Glen Raven's Roberts.

Also in the hospitality market and elsewhere, the traditional mini-blind has given way to the mesh roller shade that allows patrons to see outside while maintaining the ability to control temperature and glare in the room, Benitez says.

Fashion meets function

Just as the original La-Z-Boy moved inside, so too are fabrics originally developed for outdoor use moving indoors.

Three- and four-season porches and sun rooms, as well as new homes constructed with exceptionally large windows that allow in an abundance of natural light, require fabrics with properties similar to those designed for the outdoors.

“The consumer is now becoming even more aware that the furniture placed in areas of the house with direct sunlight exposure not only must aesthetically blend well with the rest of the interior and exterior décor, it must also perform well in regard to weathering,” says BJI's Carmicle. “This has created opportunities in the sectors of window treatments, shades, awnings, and event window tinting, in addition to more focus on high-performance fabrics.”

The trend of expansive windows and more natural light in home construction led to the development of Sunbrella residential furniture fabric, says Roberts. These fabrics combine performance with the attractive patterns and colors consumers desire for indoor furnishings.

“Consumers have a great deal more freedom today in their decorating choices for indoors and outdoors because of the increased styling sophistication of performance fabrics,” she says. “Our fabrics provide the same fade resistance, durability, and ease of cleaning whether they are used on a deck or in a family room. It is up to homeowners to decide the look and feel they want to create for their homes.”

Whether indoors or outdoors, high-performance specialty fabrics have to work with furniture frames, especially when consumers make decisions based on fashion as much as function. Fabric choices must complement frames, whether wicker, rattan, aluminum, or wrought iron. Scott of Shuford Mills

says there are more choices than ever in frames, and that the focus on new designs for frames is equally important.

“Our customers work very hard to merchandise our fabric to their frames,” she says. “We, too, consider our customers' color palate and frame designs when introducing new collections.”

BJI's Carmicle says that while fabric is the most important component in the company's furniture, the fabric choice has to work with the total package.

“We strive to coordinate all of the integral elements of a specific design—fabric, finish, accessory items, [among others]—to complement the inspiration of the design itself, as well as suit the vision of our customers,” he says. “These components are tools in our designers' toolboxes to develop a more aesthetically pleasing furniture collection.”

The harmonious combination of advanced fabric performance with attractive design means that manufacturers, retailers, and consumers have a variety of options when it comes to designing the outdoor room.

“As consumers spend more time outdoors and as they invest more in outdoor rooms, they want fabrics that are comfortable, beautiful and durable,” says Roberts. “Textile technology today makes it possible to have fabrics that offer it all—beauty, comfort, and performance.” **R**

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