

Bubble, bubble

Hot tub can be a refreshing addition to your yard

By Tom Roebuck

IF YOU'RE A HOMEOWNER with some extra space in the backyard, you may have considered filling that space with one of humanity's all-time greatest inventions: a hot tub. Sure, you could plant a garden, install a basketball hoop or even construct an outdoor kitchen. But for sheer indulgence and stress-dissolving relaxation, an outdoor spa is hard to beat.

It's been estimated that out of all the people who purchase a hot tub, 76 percent are first-time buyers. Before the age of the Internet, potential buyers would visit a dozen or more showrooms as they familiarized themselves with the different models, accessories and, especially, prices. Now you can simply type "hot tub" into any search engine and countless Web sites will appear, making for easy research as you begin the process of choosing the right model. While the Internet is a good place to start, advice should be sought from local dealers.

"You don't want something that is way out of proportion for your yard," advised Alice Cunningham, founder and co-owner of Olympic Hot Tub Co. in Seattle. "You want to choose a hot tub company that will come out, do a backyard consultation, and not only help you decide where to put it but what size would be the best."

The amount of space available isn't the only factor to consider when deciding on a hot tub. Will this be a romantic destination for two? Will it be used as a spa to soothe aching muscles after an intense workout? Will it be a weekend hangout for you and 17 of your closest friends?

"The first thing is to think about how they want to use it and how many people they're going to sit with. That's really the beginning," Cunningham said.

Just as you wouldn't buy a car without taking a test drive, stripping down and getting wet is a big part of the spa-buying process. Most dealers will let you test out the different spas in their showroom.

"Make sure that you can go in and take a test spin. Most reputable dealers have spas available to try. If the water looks funky or they put you off, you know that's not a place you want to buy from,"



Researching the various hot tub models and features will get you started, but the only way to choose the right one for you is to test it out in the dealer's showroom.

Cunningham said. "Getting in is very important because it's like a car, you don't just sit in the seat. You want to know how does this thing drive. You want to know that the water's going to be over your shoulders, in most parts of the country that's real important. And that the jets are just right, and you can adjust the jets.

"And the jets should be for all different parts of your body, like your back and your feet and we have ones now for carpal tunnel and upper shoulders. It's really gotten specialized." Hot tubs can be used year-round — indeed, winter's frigid weather can be the best time for a toasty dip outside, just as long as it's not too far from the house. With this in mind many people place their hot tub as close to the house as possible, many times outside a bedroom window or on a deck. While testing hot tubs, make note of how much noise is generated, not only while running, but also when the jets are off. The filtration system will continue to operate, and some are louder than others. Cunningham advises hot tub hunters to follow their nose.

"Smell the water. Take the sniff test. Walk into any showroom, you should not

smell chlorine. And the water should be crystal clear. You should be able to see a dime on the floor of the hot tub. A lot of tubs still use chlorine technology, which is not even technology, it's just throwing some chlorine in," she said. "But there are some very exciting technologies that don't use chlorine. So you want to look for that and certainly have no chlorine odor, and have crystal-clear water without effort or hassle."

Advances in filtration technology have made maintaining hot tubs easier than ever. Filters can fit in dishwashers, making the weekly cleaning session a 10-minute job. And instead of changing the water four times a year, many tubs only require the water to be changed twice a year.

After careful consideration, you've made your decision. But beware that the price tag might not include everything you need. Inquire about delivery, water care products, covers and installation.

"You want to know what's included. So many of them say, 'Oh, you want that delivered?' You just want to make sure you have the basics covered," Cunningham said. Your backyard will never be the same. •

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