

Outer Spaces' Susie Coelho

There is no single place people go for all their outdoor room needs. Therein lies the golden opportunity for garden centers, this DIY celebrity says.

WRITTEN BY SHANE PLISKA



CONSUMERS KEEP UP WITH what garden lifestyle expert Susie Coelho does in the outdoor room. From hosting TV shows to writing books, to an expanding portfolio of licensed gardening products, she is a well-known face, and force, in the outdoor living scene.

Eight years ago, she began as the host of *Surprise Gardener*, a makeover show on HGTV. Since then, she has gone on to host the channel's *Outer Spaces*.

In this exclusive interview with *Garden Chic*, Coelho offers her insights into the latest trends in outdoor rooms - and her candid opinions on the state of the garden retail industry.

As an ever-emerging trend, do you consider the outdoor room to be uncharted territory?

I think so. I am one of the few, and probably the most prominent, lifestyle experts in the country, in terms of outdoor living. I am not a horticulturist, but creating stylish outdoor rooms is exactly what my TV shows are all about. I did *Surprise Gardener* for five years, and I was one of the few on the air, at the time, that covered outdoor rooms. Then *Outer Spaces* was specifically about creating outdoor rooms.

During the shows, we had to make a lot of our own elements. We had to make things for the indoors durable for the outdoors. We

just couldn't find outdoor items. I personally feel there still isn't enough product on the market for the outdoor room. We haven't even tapped into the potential!

So that is one of the markets I am tapping into now, starting with the basics, like my garden gloves. I am also working on a line of products to accessorize and add style to outdoor spaces, to help enhance the outdoors in a fun way.

Do you think garden centers should focus on promoting the outdoor room concept?

It depends on the retailer and how much room they have.

Big-box retailers think of space in dollars and cents; and smaller, independent garden centers may not have the space for the amount of merchandise they need to carry for a complete room.

Right now, nobody does it right. They are trying to do it, but it's scattered. Big box retailers have the potential but they don't do it properly. Not one retailer, from Lowe's to The Home Depot, to independents, actually puts together fabulous outdoor rooms - display rooms, where it is easy for the customer to buy everything. They do set up pavilions, and sometimes feature nice furniture, grills and patio umbrella sets. But then, the customer has to go somewhere else to get nice cushions, throws and accessories.

No one is merchandising right or creating fabulous spaces that entice the homeowner to come in and buy into the entire program. No one is saying, "Here is the style, and you can have it!" When you think of the outdoors, and you ask someone where to go for outdoor goods, there isn't one single place that makes people answer, "That's the destination!"

What makes independent garden centers the go-to place for outdoor room enthusiasts?

The only thing independent retailers and specialty stores have over the mass merchants is their ability to offer better service - unless they have better product. Garden centers usually have better hard goods, such as nice water features, bird baths - big architectural elements and small accessories. But that better product is probably going to be more expensive because they don't purchase in mass quantities. And customers know mass retailers that buy in mass can bring the price down.

What are some of the hot outdoor room products and trends right now?

The trend that continues to be big is water features. We've been putting them in every home. Everybody should have one in their garden. They're actually simple to install. Even if it's made from concrete, you just need the manpower to put it in.

Small, self-contained bubblers, which can hook up to an outdoor-rated extension cord underground, are great, too.

Arbors, pavilions, anything that creates some kind of overhang is popular. You can hang drapes and grow bougainvillea and grape vines on them. Arbors create a structure and can really define the boundaries of the outdoor room.

Then, there are the accessories - the outdoor rugs, lighting, anything with great fabrics and beautiful wall art. Outdoor art is an exciting area, and it is difficult to get people to understand what they can really do with it, often because of concerns about weather-resistance.

What roles do your shows and products have in inspiring homeowners to think of their back yards and gardens in a different way?

That's the purpose of my shows - to inspire homeowners. I always tell people



to start with the style. They often say they want "romantic," "contemporary" or "traditional." But you have to narrow it in. While it could be one of these themes overall, I'll ask the question again, "What is your style?"

When you ask a homeowner how they want to live, they'll often say, "I need an entertainment center - an area for my kids, myself, my husband and the dog." Then, I'll say, "What style do you like?" And they say something like, "I don't know, I love Cape Cod," and we go from there.

It should be based on the homeowners' style - what they love and how they want to live. If it is Zen, what kind of Zen? Do they love rocks, water features, simplicity? Is it grasses? Do they want an Asian look with reds and blacks?

There are lifestyle considerations. A Zen back yard may not be appropriate for kids because it has a lot of rocks and pebbles - then again, maybe it would be. Maybe a Tuscan garden would be for people who like to travel to Europe

and want to entertain on a big wood table. Or someone might want something more exotic, something Moroccan, with drapes and that type of feel.

Are the outside influences, such as high gas prices, rising home interest rates and fears of terrorism, changing Americans' lifestyles, making them stay put more?

For years, many have been following Faith Popcorn's trend of cocooning. Then, people thought it could be over - and 9/11 hit. Now, people are putting tons of money into their homes, partly because it's a great investment. And if you are going to put money into your home, you are probably going to want to stick around and enjoy it.

There is a lot on the market now. The cost of outdoor goods are much more accessible. There are many more companies in the marketplace offering pavilions, water features and lighting. People can have gorgeous outdoor rooms without spending a fortune.

In the past, in order to have a beautifully landscaped back yard, you had to be a gardener or be able to hire a landscape architect to come in and structure it. Now, you can go to home improvement stores and buy 4-foot pavers, and, as long as you have somebody who is strong enough to help, you can lay them on sand with no grout. Fill them with crushed granite, and you have yourself a patio!

There are all kinds of simple and inexpensive ways to create great back yards, not just in hardscapes but other beautiful areas, too. The demand from homeowners has signaled manufacturers to create better products.

What role does color play in the outdoor room?

I don't know that the outdoor arena is

as clear as inside the home. Indoors, you can see that teal and orange are hot. Outdoors, there are some colors that stay consistent, including the basics - blues, warm oranges and greens, or, periodically, black and white and some other dramatic trend color. Since people aren't doing it *en masse* yet, it's just bits and pieces, and it's seasonal.

At my home, last year, I had orange and mango outside because I love things that are exotic. Right now, I have teal. I ended up doing a quick makeover in my yard in one day because a magazine was coming to shoot. I thought, "I can't have the same thing as last year, so it's time to do a makeover." I whipped around, and put together a whole backyard with seashells. I used teal pillows and ended up, in one evening, taking the netting from a cabana veil and buying dye at a grocery store to make it the same color as the teal pillows. Somehow, I succeeded, even though I hadn't dyed anything in 20 years. I was really pleased.

As the outdoor room becomes more popular, do you think Americans are going to get used to changing out accessories?

Across the country, Americans have to get used to the way Californians live. It's not just that we live outside all the time. A lot of times, we will bring things in. If you want to live that stylish life, it takes a little effort. When it rains, we just dash out and take the decorative pillows off so they don't get drenched. Most are outdoor-rated anyway, but why not keep them nicer? It's the same as people who put their cars in the garage if it's raining or snowing.

Do you have a favorite outdoor room project from your shows?

We have so many that I love!

We created one that involved a pony. It was something the husband wanted to give his wife because that's what she loved - the outdoors. We created a whole area that was like a ranch. We brought in a little log cabin for the kids. We had another place where we had a hitching post, grasses, gravel and a horse walkway.

On another show, we used a \$250 pavilion the homeowner already had on hand. It had a beige covering, and was just sitting in the middle of the yard. The homeowner said, "I bought this, but I want an Asian back yard, and I don't know what to do with it."

We took the pavilion and turned it into an Asian tea house. We had a gravel walkway lead up to it, an area nearby that was raked sand, a little meditation area with statues, beautiful lighting and a table for eating. It was just fabulous!

Do you have any advice for garden centers?

The more garden centers can provide a service - and market and promote that they have a knowledgeable staff who can help customers find what they need - the more business they are going to get.

Retailers are late on the trends. They are waiting for trend analyses to tell them what's the newest and hottest thing next. I happen to come from a place that is setting the trends. We are showing people, and creating outdoor rooms, and saying this is how you push the envelope.

Part of the problem is that there are few people who understand this market. I just happen to have done eight years in people's homes creating outdoor spaces. After 200-plus homes, it's clear that the retailer that really understands and is innovative enough to give space to the outdoor room concept is going to win the customer. ■