Outdoor Showers

Learn the basic details that define a good design

BY ETHAN FIERRO

Forget about rinsing off with the garden hose. After a long day spent working outdoors under a hot sun, nothing beats an outdoor shower.

There are several different types of outdoor showers, but the most practical is an enclosed design attached to a house. It's convenient, private, and the least expensive way to run hot water outdoors.

The minimum space that you need for an outdoor shower is 3 ft. sq., but go larger if you can. A shower enclosure measuring 4 ft. sq. offers a generous amount of elbow room. If an attached dressing area is in your plans, you'll need a 7-ft.-long by 4-ft.-wide area for the entire enclosure.

Creating a structure with roomy dimensions is, of course, just the first step. Smart design also requires paying attention to privacy, drainage, and weatherproofing. If you're thinking about building an attached shower in your own backyard, follow these guidelines to ensure that you have a smart design. □

Designer, builder, and artist Ethan Fierro is the author of *The Outdoor Shower* (Storey Publishing, 2006). He lives on the island of Maui in Hawaii.

CREATE PRIVACY

Design your shower's enclosure with the most demure bather in mind. Before breaking ground, stand in the spot where you've decided to build the shower and take note of all sightlines, including nearby decks, treehouses, and upper-story windows. There are clever ways to block all these views without sacrificing the breezy feeling of showering in the great outdoors. Here are a few:

- **Install an overhead trellis** Fast-growing vines on a trellis or a grillwork of beams can shield you from bird's-eye views.
- **Construct slatted walls** To build a slatted wall, nail 1x6s side by side to three horizontal 2x4s, leaving a couple of inches between each board. Then nail a second row of 1x6s to the other side of the 2x4s to cover the gaps.
- **Use offset partitions** This option is similar to the idea of constructing slatted walls, but it replaces 1x6 boards with 2-ft.-wide sections of fencing.

PROTECT YOUR SIDING

If you're planning to have your house's siding serve as one wall of your outdoor shower, it's important that that wall have adequate moisture protection. This includes housewrap or felt paper beneath the siding and at least three coats of a quality finish (paint or waterproof sealant) on the exterior surface. Another option is to build a separate shower wall of moisture-resistant wood, such as cedar or ipé, with an airspace between the shower and the exterior wall of the house. This shields the siding and allows the wet shower wall to dry thoroughly from both sides between uses. However, repainting the siding could be difficult if the shower wall is not easily removed.

SCOUT THE RIGHT SPOT

Exterior walls directly outside kitchens, bathrooms, and laundry rooms are prime locations for an outdoor shower. Having a clear path to interior hot- and cold-water lines means less work for the plumber and a less expensive price tag for you. Plan to have an access panel, similar to those used for tub decks, on the interior wall behind the outdoor-shower fixture. This removable panel allows you to maintain the shower's plumbing easily and to drain its water lines annually to prevent frozen pipes.

If you're unable to tie into interior water lines, there is a second option. To access water lines in the basement, a licensed plumber can drill two side-by-side, 1-in.-dia. holes through the house's foundation and feed hot- and cold-water lines outside.

TIP

AVOID FROZEN PIPES

If you live in a climate where temperatures drop below freezing, you must drain your pipes before the first frost hits. Have your plumber show you how this easy chore is done.

PLAN FOR GOOD DRAINAGE

When it comes to installing a drainage system for your shower water (also known as gray water), homeowners have several choices:

- **Take advantage of the municipal grid** You can connect your shower to the same drainage pipe that carries away the rest of your household wastewater. This is standard practice in urban locales, and you will likely need a licensed plumber to perform the job. If possible, situate your outdoor shower near a household drainage pipe. It's always easier and less expensive to build close to water and waste access.
- **Use gravity-fed irrigation** If you want to reuse your shower's gray water, consider fashioning a gravity-fed irrigation system. With this option, a tray beneath a permeable shower floor catches the gray water. A long, flexible hose attaches to the low point of the tray and routes the gray water into the garden. As with French drains, ecofriendly soaps are a must with this system. Also, never direct the hose toward a garden with edibles. It's unsafe to ingest untreated gray water.
- **Install a French drain** Basic by design, a French drain consists of a hole (at least 3 ft. deep) filled with crushed gravel (preferably ½ in. to 1 in. dia.). This gravel bed provides a permeable shower floor and extends 1 ft. outside the structure's perimeter. To make the floor kinder to bare feet, place a wooden grate or 1-ft.-sq. slabs of stone or tile over the gravel. Gray water drains into the gravel bed and is absorbed by the ground, so stock your shower with biodegradable soaps. Not surprisingly, this system won't pass code in some towns, especially densely populated ones.

Photo: Danielle Sherry. Drawing: John Hartman.