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Outdoor furniture goes ultra-glam



A design category once characterized by flimsy metal umbrella tables and simple folding lawn chairs has gone cutting-edge

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After the gloom and chill of winter, the first sunny day of spring is often the same in many parts of Canada. Even if it's cold outside, we tend to head straight for a patio. And if that patio happens to be our own, this is generally the time when visions of sleek, chic outdoor furniture start dancing in our heads. There is plenty of it to go around these days.

"Outdoor furniture is getting the same thought and treatment as indoor furniture," says buyer Mark Linklater of Living Space, a luxury-furniture store in Vancouver. "The development of materials has been incredible in terms of cushion fillings, weather resistance and [overall] durability."

Once limited to white metal umbrella tables and simple folding lawn chairs, outdoor designs are no longer afterthoughts and are constantly evolving. At the top end of the market, manufacturers continually research new materials, while award-winning designers such as Philippe Starck and Nicolas Thomkins are enlisted to create full ultra-stylish collections.

Outdoor furniture, German-based Dedon's Orbit canopy lounger (\$8,645), available at studio b's summer pop-up store in Toronto (www.studiobhome.com).

"We're now seeing a trend toward modular seating and chic low tables," says Jennifer Morris, communications



co-ordinator at Jardin de Ville, an outdoor-furniture store in Montreal. "It's a very contemporary look."

The industry shakeup owes much, most agree, to Dedon, the Louis Vuitton of outdoor furniture. Over the past several years, the German-based company has revolutionized the market through its innovative designs and use of cutting-edge woven synthetic fibres.

Since arriving on the Canadian scene, it has also been pleasantly surprised by its reception here, says David Beaton, who owns studio b in Toronto and recently opened his firm's first-ever pop-up store at a busy uptown intersection to showcase Dedon and other lines.

"Given our short summer season, they can't believe how much we sell here in Canada, but we're unique that way. When we finally get summer, we're out there," he says, referring to that aforementioned rush to embrace the season.

If the striking turnaround in the look and quality of outdoor furniture has sharpened consumers' appetite over these past few tough years, however, it has also come at a time when any type of significant purchase is likely to be related to home or garden.

"People want to create an outdoor refuge at home," says Robin Siegerman, a Toronto designer. "Even before the recession, many people who had them gave up their cottages and second homes. Gas is expensive and they don't want to commute two hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic every Friday. It's an appealing notion to create an oasis in your backyard."

Currently, European imports such as Dedon, Roda, Gandia Blasco, Vitra, Extremis, Tribu and Paola Lenti dominate the luxury market. American companies such as Brown Jordan and Richard Schultz are also highly popular. Buying an outdoor sofa from one of these big names will set you back about \$10,000 and the price only goes up from there.

As with fashion, however, many of the ideas and designs of these higher-end outfits have trickled down to mass-market suppliers and lines, even if the weaves may not be as tight and the detailing doesn't compare.

"People quibble about the price, but the knockoffs are cheaper for a reason," Beaton says. "They'll make the back of the [less expensive] chair straight across because it's easier, but it won't be as comfortable."

The retailer should know, as he regularly outfits his own cottage property in Ontario's Muskoka region with pieces from his showroom. He has even been known to sell the furniture to admiring passersby right off his dock, suggesting two things.

One is that, as Beaton says, "it looks that good."

The other is that some people haven't given up those second homes and are still commuting to their rustic retreats in the woods.

Only now, it seems, they're bringing better furniture with them.