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Pankaj and Arti Gupta sit beside the koi pond in their South Setauket backyard.

Backyard resorts

LIERS DROP BIG BUCKS ON POOLS, OUTDOOR KITCHENS, FIRE FEATURES AND MORE **C6**



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A bit of 'paradise'

Homeowners redo their properties to create a vacation at home

BY JIM MERRITT
Special to Newsday

Earl and Sharon Garrison's East Setauket backyard brims this summer with the kind of amenities you might find at a tropical oasis. The couple and their guests can relax under the shade of a pergola and seek refreshment drinking at an outdoor bar or plunging into a 20-by-40-foot swimming pool, all the while savoring breezes blowing through live palm trees dotting the property.

The project, which Earl Garrison said cost about \$200,000, also includes an outdoor kitchen, built-in barbecue, fire pit, hot tub and, for those lazy summer days, a seating area arrayed with comfy couches and chairs.

"I can't have paradise, so I brought paradise to me," he said.

For many a Long Islander ready to break free — finally — of their pandemic pod, the post-COVID summer days ahead offer the first opportunity in years to fully enjoy the backyard barbecue and pool season with friends and extended family. With assistance from local landscape design and landscape architecture firms, backyards were re-imagined, redesigned and renovated with a burst of construction during the COVID era, say industry experts.

"The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way Americans use their homes for daily living, relaxation and entertainment," Jessica Lautz, deputy chief economist and vice president of research for the National Association of Realtors, noted in a recent report. "Homeowners have embraced their outdoor spaces — transforming them into oases with pools, patios, plants and greenery."

On Long Island, "COVID created a stay-at-home situa-



John and Mary Rossi redesigned their Massapequa Park backyard in 2021 around an existing in-ground pool.

tion with a lot of people putting time and money into their backyard," said Ken Muellers, senior landscape designer at Hicks Landscapes in Westbury.

Formerly grassy expanses dominated by a swimming pool have been jazzed up with resort-style amenities. They crackle with fire pits, burst with color from splashy umbrellas and lounge areas and buzz with summer fun at open air kitchens and bars.

"Business is booming. People seem to want to upgrade their backyards and entertain at home," Muellers said. "All the things they would normally have inside the house, now they want outside."

FROM CANCUN TO LI

The Garrisons' backyard pavilion was designed and built two years ago, at the height of the pandemic backyard building boom, by Peter Anthony Landscaping in

South Setauket. About a dozen palm trees, including big windmill palms, are planted in the ground and in pots around the pool and 1,000-square-foot mahogany deck, creating a "tropical paradise" through September, said Earl Garrison, who owns a Long Island commercial cleaning company. (In winter the palms are wrapped and heated, or stored at a nursery, he said.)

"We throw a lot of parties,"

Garrison said of the gatherings they host for from six to 100 people. In July, they are celebrating Earl's 60th birthday with 80 friends and family, he said. For the larger gatherings, a professional bartender serves drinks at their new outdoor bar equipped with refrigerators, a wine cooler, an ice maker and sinks.

"My wife decorates with a festive look as if you are in Cancun," Garrison said.

in the backyard



Earl and Sharon Garrison's East Setauket backyard pavilion was designed and built two years ago by a landscaping company to give them "a festive look as if you were in Cancun."

Two years ago, Hicks redesigned the backyard of the center-hall Colonial where John Rossi, 79, and Mary Rossi, 75, of Massapequa Park, have lived for 27 years.

The couple "were selling their Hamptons vacation home and wanted to create a vacation-type vibe in their everyday backyard suited for outdoor entertaining and relaxation," said Hicks Landscapes designer Anthony Musso.

"We always had a built-in pool, but it needed an updo," Mary Rossi said of the project, which cost more than \$200,000.

Musso met with the couple to gauge their "goals and objectives" for the project. He walked around their backyard to determine what was needed, went to work at the drafting table, and eventually gave the Rossis an image book "created to showcase the different elements within the design, from

plant selection to hardscape material selection," he said. The project installation took about 16 days over four weeks, Musso said. It features an outdoor bar and L-shaped kitchen, a pergola and sectional seating.

Rossi said this summer she's looking forward to backyard barbecues, family gatherings and sunsets watched sipping an Aperol Spritz or a margarita.

"My husband and I just love sitting out there," Rossi said. "It's brought us a lot of happiness."

AFTER-WORK REFUGE

Backyard redesigns across Long Island run the gamut, from modest projects in the \$10,000 range to luxurious million dollar-plus East End makeovers spurred by COVID-era migration from New York City, according to industry experts.

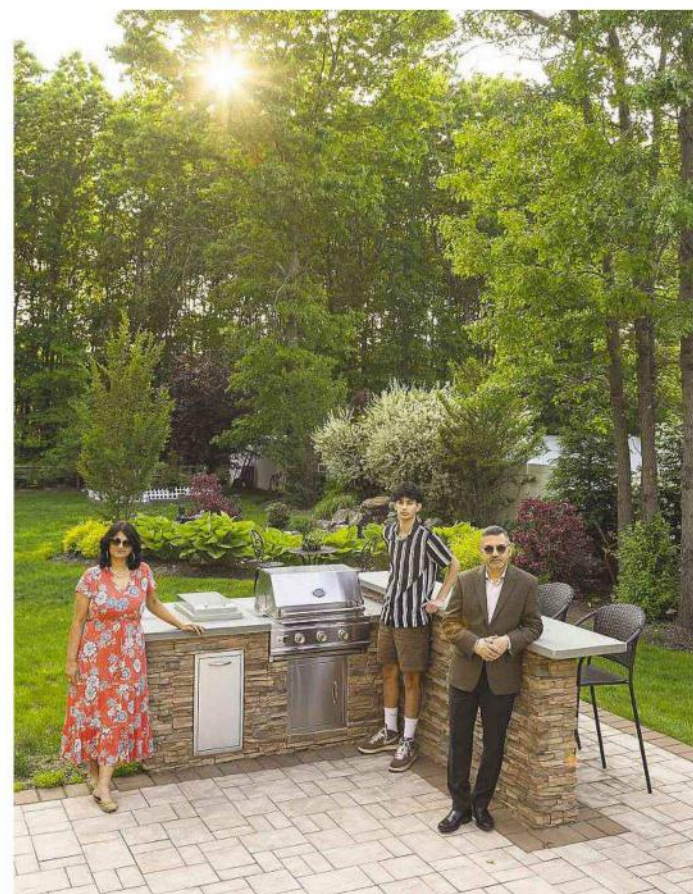
Landscape architect Brian J. Mahoney's Westhampton

Beach firm designs backyards for homes in "old sections of beautiful villages with history and a demand for really exquisite and simplified designs."

"No two projects are alike," said Mahoney, a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects. "Some people want their homes to look like resorts with amazing furniture with amazing accouterments. Around the pool they want a level of comfort, or ease of use; lounge chairs that are easy to use, electrical umbrellas" and "beautiful landscape lighting, so at night there's an ambience, an exciting flair."

Nationwide, the most popular backyard entertainment installations include fire features, at an average cost of \$9,000, new patios (\$10,500), and outdoor kitchens (\$15,000), according to NAR.

Peter Anthony Pietromonaco, owner of Peter Anthony Land-



Arti, left, and Pankaj Gupta with their son, Kshom, by the kitchen/barbecue in the backyard of their South Setauket home.

scaping, said that his recent backyard redesigns include a \$20,000 project featuring a patio with a fire pit, a small seating wall and a stone stoop with a paver landing.

"The majority of our jobs fall between \$50,000 and \$150,000," Pietromonaco said. He added that "a higher-end project at the \$350,000 price could include a pool, pavilion, outdoor kitchen, fireplace, fire pit, paver patio, water features, seating walls, outdoor lighting and full planting install."

But it's a badminton net that has Pankaj Gupta, 53, chief operating officer at a pharmaceutical company, and his wife, Arti, 48, serving up fun this summer in their own redone backyard.

The family previously lived in a town house development on Long Island with limited space to garden or play games. Gupta had yearned for his own backyard space to relax in after

a workday. His backyard ambitions, which cost around \$50,000, were realized in the autumn of 2019, a few years after purchasing their current Victorian-style home in South Setauket. Peter Anthony Landscaping transformed their barren backyard into an after-work refuge featuring a two-level patio, a small kitchen/barbecue, a fish pond and a fire pit where they often while away spring and fall evenings.

This summer Pankaj and Arti Gupta will be hitting the birdie back and forth with their son, Kshom Gupta, 17, a senior and member of the varsity badminton team at Ward Melville High School.

"We don't go out too much, and we don't take many vacations," Gupta said of his family. Instead, he said, the family is spending summer weekends and evenings "outside, and enjoying every bit of our backyard."

RICK KOPSTEIN

BARRY SLOAN