



Architect Merle Thorpe designed the 40- by 19-foot addition (right) to nestle into the existing trees.



The new outdoor room was sited to take in the beauty of a Chesapeake Bay creek.

Make Room for Summer

A Maryland couple discovers a whole new world of entertaining after deciding they'll no longer grill steaks beside the driveway

When a summer cookout cranks up, who doesn't head for the steaks sizzling on the grill or pitch in with prepping in the kitchen? But if the only place for the grill is next to the garage, the party can feel disjointed. The owners of this Eastern Shore summer home had had enough of this setup. They needed a better spot for entertaining their far-flung kids, grandkids, and friends. They enlisted Washington, D.C., architect and friend Merle Thorpe to build an open-air addition where everyone gets together to cook, mingle, and catch the fabulous views and breezes on their Chesapeake Bay creek.

DESIGNING THE STRUCTURE

As a frequent guest at their gatherings, Merle knew how much the family enjoys walking across the back lawn to the water where they set sail for the bay every chance they get. Until they built the addition, the

STYLING: MATTHEW GLEASON



long, beautiful view of the water wasn't visible from where they entertained. "Rooms inside the house had been renovated before," Merle says, "but not in a way to cater to their lifestyle on the water." So he designed a single, enormous room that's multipurpose. "It's a 40- by 19-foot, one-room-deep, floor-to-ceiling screened addition to the main house," he says. "And except for where it's attached by double doors to the main house sunroom, it is entirely separate to facilitate air circulation."

Going without air-conditioning in the sultry Eastern Shore summer is unheard of, but Merle engineered natural cooling with a raised roof structure of operable clerestory windows for ventilation. "An internal thermal effect created by those venting windows pulls warm air up from below and cool air in through screening on four sides," he says. Merle built the walls with staggered steel columns sunk 4 feet into a thick concrete foundation. The columns and foundation support trusses that span the ceiling, allowing the walls to accept weightless screened panels. Stainless steel mesh screening has a black anodized finish

ABOVE: The kitchen layout allows the chef to see out to the water while serving and talking to guests. **LEFT:** Outdoor-rated appliances and a low-maintenance paint finish on the cabinets combat saltwater corrosion.



that looks nearly invisible, so the four sides of the room feel magically open to the outdoors.

PLANNING THE INTERIOR SPACE

First priority for the open-air room's layout was a grilling kitchen. Merle placed it so the chef could see straight to the creek while serving guests at the dining table. Good thing, too, because the stainless steel grill, exhaust hood, side burners for big pots of corn and crabs, and twin under-counter refrigerators generate constant conversation. Great care was taken to choose weather-resistant teak dining furniture, upholstery fabrics, appliances, and cabinet paint finishes that are impervious to the corrosive marine environment.

When the meal ends and evening comes, everyone moves to a seating area of wicker furniture before the fireplace. The natural ventilation of the big room has proved so comfortable in summer that family members often chat into the wee hours and inflate air mattresses to convert the spacious area into a sleeping porch. ⇨

LEFT: The owners selected a gas insert instead of burning wood because of its lower maintenance. In cool months, they set beach stones that have been warmed by the fire around the room to act as heaters. **BELOW:** Brick pavers are a durable, traditional outdoor flooring choice.





The outdoor dining table and cafe-like chairs are made with sustainable teak.

Tips on Building an Open-Air Room

Architect Merle Thorpe and project manager Jeff Chown reveal some of the subtle details that make the big, open room so comfortable.

- The brick-paved floor is pitched slightly in all directions from a central crown so it can be hosed off as needed. Kitchen cabinets elevated on stainless steel legs let the water wash beneath.
- A line of mortar at the base of the screened walls acts like a wick to sponge away water and keep it from collecting inside the room.
- Columns are grounded in the thick foundation (like a sailboat keel supports a mast), so all four sides of the room can be left completely open without the need for diagonal bracing.
- The fireplace hearth, like the floor, is composed of bricks that match the house foundation. Raising the firebox enables it to be seen from around the room.
- Strong steel columns support walls of screened panels and a roof with ventilating windows to move air through the room below. 

