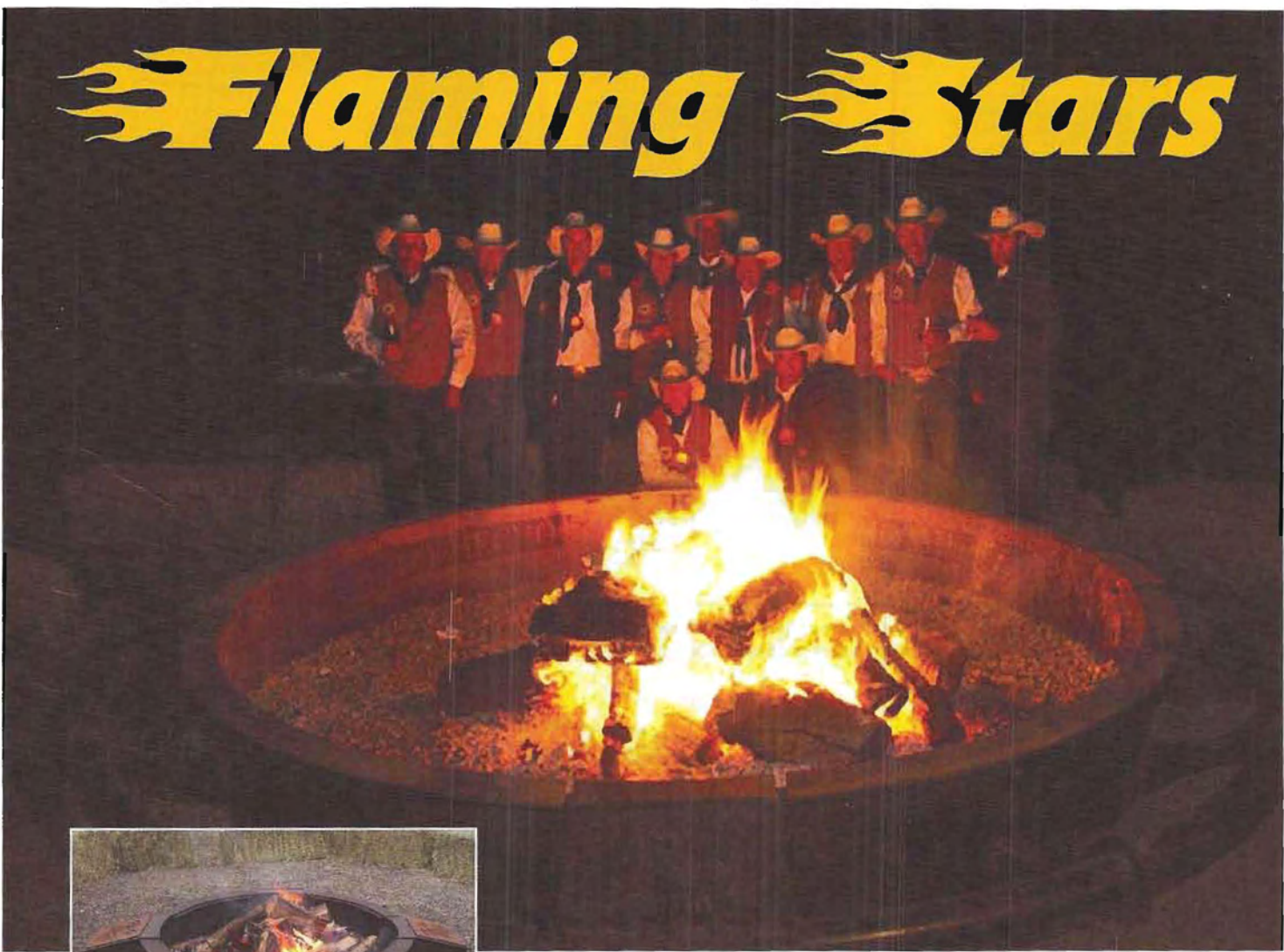


Flaming Stars



Whether fueled by gas or wood, firepits appear to be one of the hottest products for the Outdoor Room.

In case you haven't been paying attention, here's something you can take to the bank: firepits rock.

Pride Family Brands confirmed this when it introduced its first firepits at the Casual Preview Show in Chicago this past July. With just one exception, every order placed by retailers from that show through August included firepits. That tidbit is from Rory Rehmert, vice president of sales. "We're pretty happy," he says.

Did you catch that percentage? Firepits rock.

"There is exponential growth in this category, and it's tightly coupled to the Outdoor Room," says Ted Scott, national sales manager for Napoleon Appliance Corp. Firepits, he says, "have been huge for us."

Firepits and Outdoor Rooms, together, rock. Factory-built firepits have been around for a couple of decades or more.

Early models burned wood, and there are plenty of wood-burning firepit choices still on the market.

Mass merchants have a lock on the promotionally priced units in that subcategory, though some up-market hearth and casual furniture companies make units for North America's wood-burning holdouts.

Gas-burning firepits are in the spotlight now. These products really took hold in the mid-2000s as homeowners sought ways to enhance their Outdoor Rooms with open flames. Gas-burning firepits provide all the allure of a campfire or a burning hearth, but without cinders or smoke or ashes.

Growing numbers of furniture makers have embraced firepits, which are

Above: A one-off extra large Maverick firepit from Travis Industries. Inset: Daytime view.

a natural complement to chat groups and deep seating. Many firepits ship with covers or inserts that convert the flame area into a usable table surface for those times when a fire isn't appropriate. Firepits with round burn areas sometimes have drop-in Lazy Susans, making the resulting table even more versatile for entertaining.



Kiribati firepit from Bradford Lifestyles.

Firepits satisfy on two levels: The dancing flames please the eye, regardless of the time of year, and the fire can take the chill off an evening that might otherwise send people scurrying indoors. That benefit is a major enticement for the casual furniture industry – firepits extend the season, spring and fall, giving people additional reasons to purchase and enjoy outdoor furniture.

Beauty, convenience and heat, all in one package for the Outdoor Room. Firepits rock.

Susan Heer, CEO of Bradford Lifestyles, calls firepits an enormous category. The Vancouver, British Columbia, company has offered firepits for three seasons. People want an outdoor living room, she says, and a firepit “really does expand your lifestyle.” She has a firepit on her deck, situated under a large umbrella. “We spend time there even in the rain,” she says, and the umbrella helps retain the heat. “We’re very comfortable, and we keep our flame at half” of its maximum height, she says. “Our flame comes up a good 16 in. at full tilt.”

OW Lee introduced its first propane-fueled firepit in 2003. By today’s standards, it was primitive. The fuel tank sat

alongside the firepit, fully exposed. But the firepit sold, and subsequent models, refined year after year, sold even better.

Firepits accounted for 20 percent of OW Lee’s sales volume in 2011, says Terri Lee Rogers, president of OW Lee. “We have the most comprehensive firepit program out there,” she says.

For 2012, OW Lee is offering nine basic firepit designs. The various frame finishes and surface treatments (cast, tile, etc.) mean that homeowners may choose from up to 900 different permutations.

“We’re expanding our styles and options,” Rogers says. “That’s how we’re competing with the guys who are

just bringing out firepits.”

A competitor about to enter the firepit fray is Summer Classics. The company will have one or more products available in the spring, says Harold Hudson, vice president of sales and marketing.

Pride Family Brands’ firepit comes in round and rectangular versions, each about 22 in. in height. The rectangular model has a double row of flames, according to Rehmert.

Pride worked on engineering the burners to provide a longer burn without sacrificing heat production, he says. “It really comes down to more burn hours, 10 or 12 on a tank,” Rehmert says.



Cypress aluminum chat-height firepit from OW Lee.



Casabella firepit from Pride Family Brands.



Taos/The Outdoor GreatRoom Company.

I Pride Family Brands' firepits are available with six choices of cast tops. The firepits will retail for about \$1,999. "We thought the price point was magic," Rehmer says, "and it's proving to be."

There's a firepit – or perhaps we should say a fire feature – for every pocketbook. At the low end are products that actually sit atop an existing table and burn gel-fuel to create a flame protected by a glass chimney. The Outdoor GreatRoom Company makes about five different styles that retail for around \$200.

The company also makes a variety of firepit tables that conform to the

standard notion of this product: a square or round table standing about 22 in. high. Within the tabletop is a burner topped with glass chunks, lava rock or artificial logs. The flame area is protected by a wide surround, which provides space to place a beverage or prop one's feet on a cool evening. Underneath the tabletop is room to hide the 20-lb. propane tank. As with most manufacturers, almost all units also can be modified for permanent connection to natural gas and usually ship with the necessary parts.

The Outdoor GreatRoom Company's firepit tables are priced from under \$1,000 to about \$2,500.

about \$900 and range up to \$3,000, says executive vice president Shiva Noble. "A firepit is the cheapest product a homeowner can buy for the backyard that gives them the ambiance they are looking for," she says.

Cal Flame's firepit business is growing about 30 percent a year, she says.

Homecrest Outdoor Living makes several styles of firepit tables, some with propane burners and others with "venturi flame" bio-ethanol burners. Homecrest's Universal Firepit is available in chat, dining and counter heights at retail prices from about \$1,800 to \$2,050. A new variation introduced this fall features a wicker-textured base that



Model G5000 by Cal Flame.

Stone Age Manufacturing offers three sizes of round, wood-burning firepit kits, plus square and rectangular kits, all constructed of high-temperature concrete and designed for fast, easy assembly. Stone Age firepits have feet molded into the units to allow movement after assembly or placement on wooden structures. They are available as unassembled kits, or pre-assembled and prefinished with a variety of natural thin stone, thin brick or man-made stone finish options. Any wood-burning Stone Age firepit may be easily converted to gas operation for use with gas logs or fireglass.

At the extreme end of the pricey spectrum is the 2011 Vesta Award-winning product called Rays of Light, made by Cal Flame. This sleek stainless-steel and glass product retails for just under \$10,000.

Cal Flame's other firepits begin at

encloses the propane fuel tank.

The Robert H. Peterson Co., a leader in the hearth industry, makes a range of self-contained firepit products sold under the Outdoor Campfire brand. The company also sells firepit components (burners, valves, etc.) for custom installation by landscaping contractors and builders of Outdoor Rooms.

"We're seeing that specialty retailers are starting to provide these individual components to the end user or builder," says Mike Waller, vice president of sales for the Peterson Co. It's part of the trend toward complete Outdoor Room customization.

Contractors and homeowners are combining fire features with water features, he says. Flame-producing equipment is being placed in large pots and urns bordering entrances as homeowners



Homecrest's Universal firepit.