

Smart Money

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EXPERT SHOPPER

The Great Outback

We found new patio furniture that will outshine and outlast the old stuff. *By Noah Rothbaum*

There's a reason patio furniture has traditionally deserved to sit *behind* the house, away from neighbors' judging eyes: After a few too many summer barbecues, these rickety pieces get to looking, well . . . overcooked. Not anymore. Now that homeowners are dining alfresco up to three seasons a year, the patio is evolving into what decorators call a true "outdoor living space," demanding a serious upgrade in

aesthetics. That often means more formal-looking furniture—good enough to sit inside the house—and bigger pieces, too: The American Furniture Manufacturers Association predicts that tables seating 12 or more will be hot this season.

But even if you have no intention of inviting the whole cul-de-sac to dinner, you can easily create a new garden spot that will look good for as much of the year as you can

stand to be outside. Manufacturers are now using a number of new materials to expand the range of durable but affordable outdoor furniture: woods that are as tough as teak but less expensive, a substitute for cast iron that doesn't weigh a ton and wicker that can withstand the elements. Here's what you should know before you make your backyard available to its adoring public.

[The following is excerpted.]



CHIC, NOT TEAK: This balau Canterbury set goes for \$470.

COURTESY AVONLEA GARDENS (CANTERBURY SET)

INTO THE WOODS: THE TEAK LOOK

TEAK HAS LONG been the king of outdoor furniture, legendary for its strength, beauty and decades-long durability. Because of its classic, natural looks, “it will never go out of style,” says Karin Strom, an interior decorator and author of *What’s in Style—Outdoor Living*. But its price can give many barbecuers pause: A simple slatted teak round table for four made by Gloster sells at Web and catalog retailer Frontgate for \$1,005, with the matching folding chairs going for \$355 apiece.

If you want the look of teak but

aren’t ready to get a second job to pay for it, you’ll have a challenge sifting through the teak pretenders on the market. A number of stores sell furniture made out of so-called teak-like woods: pine, iroko or nyatoh, which are less expensive but also don’t last as long. Yet one alternative—yellow balau—actually holds its own, says Susie Coelho, a lifestyle expert and host of Home and Garden Television’s *Outer Spaces*. Not only is wood from the balau tree used for shipbuilding in Asia—a testament to its durability—but it has been rated by the International Tropical Timber Organization as even

stronger and tougher than teak. Plus, it ages in the same way, turning silvery gray over time if not treated. Best of all, while the overharvesting of teak has kept its prices high, balau is still plentiful, meaning prices have stayed low. The Canterbury set, a slatted octagonal table and four slatted chairs from Web retailer Avonlea Gardens, (www.AvonleaGardens.com) looks mighty similar to the Gloster set, but starts at only \$350. And since, as with Gloster’s teak, the joints are tightly interlocking, this stuff won’t fall apart—so you might be able to leave it to your grandkids. **SM**