

Creating stunning pergolas with southern cypress

UPGRADING A HOME'S OUTDOOR living space continues to be top of mind for homeowners—creating a functional gathering spot and adding lasting value. While a simple patio or deck can provide an open-air setting, many homeowners are looking to beat the heat and make their fun in the sun more comfortable by installing a pergola. And when it comes to creating an outdoor structure that's built to last, cypress is the natural choice.

"Cypress is growing to be more and more of a popular building product in the Southeast and is increasingly sought-after all over the country because it's naturally durable and doesn't need to be pressure treated," says Tripp Josey, Josey Lumber Co., Scotland Neck, N.C. "The cypressene oil that cypress trees produce in their heartwood acts as a preservative, protecting the wood from nature and making it resistant to decay. It's an attribute that makes cypress a great choice for outdoor applications like pergolas."



GROWING TREND: Cypress provides a vintage, rustic look that's a growing trend with homeowners, as well as the desire to bring the inside out. (Photo courtesy SCMA)


Hubert Burns of My Outdoor Rooms, Dothan, Al., agrees—and for good reasons. "We've been building with cypress for more than 10 years, and found that it performs well when exposed to the elements, is naturally durable, and deters insect infestation," he says. "I also find cypress much more advantageous to work with than pressure treated pine; it's more beautiful and natural looking. Gradewise, we typically use #2 or better in rough cut form, and have found that cypress takes stain better, too."

With proper maintenance and re-staining every four-to-six years, you'll have a like-new pergola. It's also important to use copper or stainless steel endcaps on posts to keep water from penetrating the grain." Cypress also has a rich, vintage look to it, a popular trend that continues to grow among homebuyers.

More homeowners are starting to notice how pergolas—as well as similar structures like pavilions, arbors, and trellises—provide open and airy spaces, along with much needed relief from direct sunlight that can't be achieved with a traditional patio or deck. They also offer a perfect outdoor setting for enjoying dinner with family and entertaining friends, a useful patio accessory as more people are desiring to bring the inside out. "Pergolas can be outfitted with TVs and fireplaces, and adorned with plants and drapery to add privacy and a personal touch," Burns says.

Many factors go into designing a pergola or similar structure, including how it ties into the rest of the space, how big of a structure the homeowner envisions, its shape, and the direction of slats for shading. When building a cypress pergola, common post dimensions are 8x8 or 10x10, beams are 4x8 or 4x12, and slats are 2x8 or 2x12.

While it may seem like a complicated process, building a gorgeous pergola with cypress need not be a daunting task. Burns says companies across the country specialize in prefabricating structures and ship nationwide, taking the stress out of design and construction. "Prefabrication ensures they are high-quality and can be installed quickly," Burns adds. "And three people can install a 16-ft.-by-16-ft. pergola in about five hours.

"Most importantly, outdoor living space is an investment and homeowners deserve high-quality structures that will last. That's why we almost always use cypress as a main building material for pergolas and other outdoor structures. With cypress, they'll last for years to come." 

— Ian Faight is marketing director for SCMA. For more information on cypress building products, visit www.cypressinfo.org.