

THE OUTDOOR SHOWER:

# A private oasis

Four designers discuss the best materials for creating that wonderful complement to Vineyard living – along with ideas for building your own.

BY ANNE MCCARTHY STRAUSS

Those in the know realize an outdoor shower is much more than a means of keeping sand out of the house. Whether the shower design is strictly utilitarian or strikingly beautiful, taking a shower outside offers an experience that showering indoors can rarely match.

There are as many types of outdoor showers as there are people who own them. To illustrate this, we spoke with several builders and architects who have designed and constructed outdoor showers on the Vineyard. These talented professionals use a range of materials in their work: Lew French is known for his work with stone, Maryann Thompson uses a lot of glass and open walls, and Mark Hutker uses mostly cedar and stone. There is even a “disappearing shower,” designed by Ben Kelley.



AUSON SHAW

This outdoor shower in Aquinnah was designed by Hutker Architects to give the user privacy and suit the surrounding natural environment, from both the outside (above) and inside (facing). The open walls and sunny location are also perfect for ventilation and drying.



BRIAN VANDER BRINK



Lew French crafted this Chilmark shower, with its elaborate stone design, in a sun-filled corner.



While a disappearing shower may be an appealing alternative to a more standard outdoor stall when space is limited, some shower designs are so attractive that their owners have no desire to hide them, as they add a touch of beauty to their outdoor surroundings.

Working exclusively with stone and natural material, Lew French is known for unique constructions. "I've done three or four outdoor showers here that were all part of a bigger design picture such as a pool area," Lew says. A master craftsman and the owner of Lew French – Stone by Design in Edgartown, he sources all of his stones himself. And he shapes fewer than 1 percent of them, leaving the others uncut, retaining their natural contours.

Lew will search for days through active and abandoned quarries to choose the stones that are right for a particular project. "I work with stone for its visual power," he says. "It excited me in the beginning and still does. Showers are especially intriguing because of their combination of stone and water, which I liken to a natural rainforest."

A personal fan of outdoor showering, Maryann Thompson, principal of Maryann Thompson Architects in Cambridge, has had at least four of her designs installed on the Vineyard. "Everything I do is about heightening an awareness of the site and landscape," she says. "It's also important that roofs let in light from above. The outdoor showers we do are often connected to bathrooms so that they extend the space of the bathroom to the outdoors."

Mark Hutker, principal of Hutker Architects in Vineyard Haven and Falmouth, says, "Showers without walls are not just for post-swimming rinses in bathing suits and for exhibitionists. We've designed showers that appear to be wide open but are actually positioned in such a way that they afford the bathers complete privacy. We can accomplish

ALISON SHAW



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Maryann Thompson designed this two-head outdoor shower area (top) to flow beautifully from the bathroom inside this home in Aquinnah.





Ben Kelley designed this “disappearing shower” in Oak Bluffs to save space – the walls roll out from the house when you’re ready to use the shower.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAXON WHITE

this using three simple but strategically placed panels.”

According to Ben Kelley, principal at Building Shelter in Vineyard Haven, the best way to describe his design may be as a “no shower” – the result of his effort to expand deck space. Known for his creativity, resourcefulness, and attention to detail, Ben gives nearly as much care to creating a simple outdoor shower as he does to building a home. “The disappearing shower is composed of several walls that move to become a shower and collapse to become a wall,” he says.

Once those walls are pulled open, the bather steps into a completely private area open to the sky, and a bench can be folded down from one of the walls for added comfort and convenience. The shower’s cedar walls stand on tiny wheels that enable them to be rolled back until the enclosure virtually disappears. Ben says, “It was my intention to make the

most out of a small space, save some time, save some money on materials, and leave more space for such natural beauty as trees and blueberry bushes.”

#### Designing your own outdoor shower

An outdoor shower can be as simple as a showerhead and pipe affixed to the side of your house or dramatically more elaborate, depending on your available space, imagination, and budget. Like its indoor equivalent, the outdoor shower’s basic features consist of a water supply, drainage, plumbing, fixtures, and (ideally) a unit for heating the water. The location, enclosure, lighting, and seating are other factors to consider.

Whether you’re building the shower on your own or working with a designer to create the shower of your dreams, try to position it in an area that is exposed to full sun. An eastern exposure is best for those who shower in the morning; facing west is best for showering at the end of

the day. The sun enhances the shower experience and is also practical for drying out the shower walls after use.

Because proper ventilation is important, the ideal shower should be as open as possible. Exposure to the sky enhances both the ventilation and natural beauty of your shower environment. If the shower must be adhered to the facade of your home, expect that there may be some discoloration of shingles or siding from the water. And, of course, size matters – depending on the bather’s preference and whether showering out-of-doors will be a solitary experience.

All the designers emphasized the importance of plantings in the landscape surrounding the shower, often in conjunction with a lattice or trellis. Keep in mind that certain plants may grow substantially over time. And be sure to use environmentally sensitive soaps, not only to protect the environment, but also to avoid harming your nearby plantings.

The closer your hot water heater is to the shower, the more quickly hot water will arrive. Other important considerations are the shower valve and the showerhead. A solid brass shower valve will withstand the salty exterior exposure of the Vineyard. Showerhead choices include those designed to make the water fall softly like rain, or those that offer a variety of flows such as pulse or mist. Plumbing controls should be installed in an insulated location for winter users or include an easy way to drain the plumbing in the off-season to avoid freezing the pipes.

Proper drainage beneath the shower area is also vital. Dig and fill a cubic yard with crushed gravel below the shower base, and if the shower is located alongside the house, include an underground drain leading away from the building.

Flooring choices for the wet area can be wood, non-skid stone, or another rot-resistant material. Mark Hutker sug-

gests the best decking is mahogany or Port Orford cedar, neither of which will splinter. For lighting, he suggests low path lighting and the avoidance of bright mounted lights, because they attract insects.

In addition to the shower itself, there are many add-ons to embellish your outdoor-bathing experience. You may want to include a sink, a dressing area, a bench, or other amenities. Be sure to include enough storage space for toiletries and hooks for towels.

Ethan Fierro, a former Vineyarder who now makes his home in Maui, might have said it best in his book *The Outdoor Shower: Creative Design Ideas for Backyard Living, from the Functional to the Fantastic* (Storey Publishing, 2006), in which he describes an outdoor shower as a place where on a “cool summer evening, illuminated fireflies become lighthouses in steam.”

Go ahead – take the plunge. ♦



BRIAN VANDEN BRINK

Hutker Architects used an existing glacial boulder as the base of this Chilmark shower.