

# Choose a spa tailored to your needs

Choosing a spa begins with deciding on how you want to use it. For many, a spa conjures up visions of our own private getaway — an oasis from the hustle and bustle of demanding jobs. Most people are content with a cozy spa for two, but if entertaining is a priority, it's best to find a spa that can accommodate at least four.

Manufactured spa shells made of acrylic or thermoplastic are molded at the factory to fit the body contours and come in a variety of shapes and sizes. They typically use separate equipment systems, require professional installation and are permanent once installed. Prices range from \$5,000 to \$8,000, including installation.

Portable manufactured spas are popular because they can be used practically the day they are delivered. Everything — pump, heater, filter — is included in the spa cabinet. All you typically need is a dedicated electrical outlet and a nearby garden hose. Prices range from about \$3,000 to \$8,000.

Spas can also be custom-built to suit one's special needs. Most are formed of gunite — a sprayed concrete — and steel reinforcing bars. These in-ground spas may be further enhanced with such features as rocks, fountains or waterfalls. Costs vary depending on whether the spa is combined with a pool or it stands alone.

Hot tubs are usually round and built of wood.

Today, redwood is the most popular choice, though teak, cedar, oak, cypress and mahogany can also be used. Hot tubs use separate equipment systems and require professional installation. Costs range from \$5,000 to \$8,000.

One couple narrowed their list of potential purchases to two. Outfitted with swimsuits and thick, terry towels, our next step was to soak in each spa.

Standing in dry street clothes on showroom floors, we were impressed with such features as built-in ice chests and bubbler systems. When soaking in the 104-degree water, they gained a different perspective.

They became more concerned with the depth of the water, the seating capacity and the action of the jets. They asked themselves the following questions: Are some seats deep enough to let us cool down? Are others high enough to let us sit up? Could we comfortably exercise?

The spa's most obvious feature is its shell. The two most common types are acrylic over fiberglass and weather-resistant thermoplastics. Ask your sales associate to describe the advantages and disadvantages of both. Look at the sheathing — most are vertical-grain redwood.

How is the spa insulated? Spas are insulated in one of two ways: total insulation between the shell and the sides or the "thermo-pane" effect of using air space as an insulator. Ask for liter-

ature supporting the efficiency of each design.

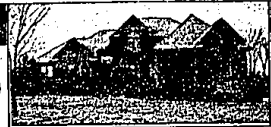
In the cover included in the cost of the spa? Does it meet the American Society of Testing Materials safety standards? Is it tapered from the middle to allow water to run off if the spa is outdoors? Can it be locked for added safety?

The pump, the heater and the filter are the heart of the system. Many configurations are on the market, and all systems are designed to heat and filter the water. Is the filter large enough so you only have to clean it once a month? Make sure the spa and equipment meet all applicable codes and standards.

Get a copy of the warranty before you sign the contract. How long are you covered 100 percent with no pro-rations, deductibles and trip fees? Does the warranty include parts and labor? Will you incur out-of-pocket expenses if the spa has to be replaced under warranty?

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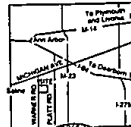
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