



Suite 1001, 1601 North Kent Street  
Arlington, VA 22209 USA  
Phone: 703-522-0086 ♦ Fax: 703-522-0548  
Email: [hpbamail@hpba.org](mailto:hpbamail@hpba.org)  
Web Site: [www.hpba.org](http://www.hpba.org)

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## Forecast: A Sizzling Summer

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The summer of 2005 is going to be hot ... and that doesn't just mean the weather. If today's barbecue grills and other outdoor living products are any indication, Americans should be having one heck of a good time in their backyards this year.

Never before have grills, outdoor appliances, patio furniture and accessories been so innovative or of such high quality and style. But the best news for consumers is that, thanks to tremendous competition among manufacturers, consumers are getting much more value for their money.

The biggest trend for 2005 is the growing emphasis on the outdoor room. Rather than a series of mismatched items on the patio, an outdoor room is a well-designed living space with areas for cooking, dining, relaxing and entertaining.

Grills are the focal point of the outdoor room and are often built into island cabinet bases, which offer plenty of countertop area for food prep and serving. The grills are sometimes teamed with refrigerators, warming drawers, sinks, cocktail stations, stereo and television systems and other appliances, putting everything you need for outdoor entertaining within reach.

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A heating element is another star feature in an outdoor room. Whether an alfresco fireplace, a firepit or a patio heater, these features provide warmth and can actually extend the outdoor living season. They also add a cozy and homey touch to the outdoor living space, literally bringing all the comforts of indoors out.

Gas grills are still the most popular type of barbecue and today's units are multi-tasking appliances that make it possible to prepare nearly anything that can be made in an indoor kitchen. In addition to traditional gas burners, a growing number also include infrared searing "zones," charcoal pans to convert to charcoal grilling on a whim, convection cooking capability for baking and roasting, and built-in smoker boxes with dedicated burners for smoke cooking.

Beyond the now-commonplace side burners and rotisseries, flat-top griddle pans, built-in lighting for nighttime grilling, and digital thermometer probes provide greater ease and convenience in playing these multiple roles.

But, while gas grills remain on top, charcoal grills are gaining a following once again. An increasing number of consumers are sold not only on the flavor and versatility of charcoal grilling, but also the ritual of preparing the fire, particularly with natural hardwood or lump charcoal. Whether it is part of a renewed interest in natural products or a return to vintage or nostalgic items, charcoal is making a comeback.

Electric grills are beginning to set off new sparks, as well. Preferred by many women and senior citizens, and required by fire code regulations for some apartment and condo dwellers, new and more powerful versions of electric grills are being introduced. These revamped grills burn hotter than their predecessors, now reaching temperatures high enough to sear a steak.

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Grill manufacturers are making it a lot easier to take that cookout on the road. Many new high-quality tote-along portable units have hit the shelves in recent years. Not the flimsy braziers or hibachis of old, these new units are often miniature versions of larger, high-end grills and are packed with all the quality materials and many of the features of their larger siblings.

Accessories, too, are helping to enhance outdoor cooking experiences. Ranging from purposeful and professional to kitschy and crazy, accessories can expand the cooking versatility of even the most basic barbecue grill, while adding a whole lot of fun in the process. Look for a host of new sauces and seasonings in ethnic flavors to add a twist to alfresco menus. Also new are a wide variety of tools and gadgets to make everything from pizza to pancakes possible on the grill.

With this ensemble of great, new outdoor living products, the forecast for backyard barbecues is definitely *hot*.

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### **About the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association (HPBA)**

The Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association (HPBA), based in Arlington, Va., is the North American industry association for manufacturers, retailers, distributors, representatives, service firms and allied associates for all types of hearth, barbecue and patio appliances, fuels and accessories. The association provides professional member services and industry support in education, statistics, government relations, marketing, advertising and consumer education. There are more than 2,600 members in the HPBA.