



MEDIA CONTACTS:

Julie Brosien
FALLS COMMUNICATIONS
(216) 472-2395
jbrosien@fallscommunications.com

Scott Tennant
Director of Communications
VITAMIX CORPORATION
(440) 782-2447
stennant@vitamix.com

TIPS & TRICKS TO SIMPLIFY OUTDOOR ENTERTAINING

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Some of summer's favorite moments happen right in your backyard: The sounds of children running around, the smells of fresh-cut grass and newly planted flowers, and the gathering of family and friends make the season one to take full advantage of after the chilly winter and brisk spring months.

The best way to bring everyone together this season is to successfully entertain outdoors. Here are a few simple tips and tricks to make your next soiree the best one yet:

Build an atmosphere

Your patio and backyard are an extension of your home, so don't limit your creativity to the indoors. One of the best ways to create the perfect summer atmosphere is to string paper lanterns or lightbulbs across your deck or around the railings. That way, you won't have to resort to a harsh spotlight or overhead lighting. Keep in mind when you're outdoor furniture shopping that while you want your chairs to be stylish, you also want to make sure they provide a comfy seat. Many outdoor furniture cushions are made from a rough material – so get creative with indoor cushions that are more comfortable instead. You can always bring them inside if a summer rain hits. You want your furniture to not only look inviting, but serve a functional purpose. Rather than keeping an outdoor cooler sitting in the corner, consider making a DIY picnic table with cooler storage or building a wooden crate for your existing cooler. Create space and balance by utilizing the corners of your deck, as well, with an accent plant, side table or a rustic bar cart.

Keep your guests full and happy

Create a simple and refreshing summer appetizer and drinks menu to keep your guests content and the party going well into the evening. When you're ready to get started on your menu, a high-performance blender, such as the [Vitamix 780](#), is a must-have kitchen appliance.

The sleek silhouette, touch-screen panel and low-profile container makes large batches quickly and clean-up easy. Easily whip up a batch of smoothies for unexpected visitors. To make a [cucumber melon smoothie](#), simply blend chunks of cucumber, grapes, cantaloupe and honeydew for the perfect summer treat for both kids and adults. For kids' summer sleepovers, try an easy [no-nut butter](#) recipe – perfect for dipping apples and carrots and refueling after an intense backyard game of flag football. Simply blend sunflower, flaxseed and sesame seeds, and you won't need to worry about any gluten or nut allergies. For the perfect happy hour, incorporate refreshing pineapple into your menu and treat your guests to a summer combination of [piña coladas](#) and [fruity avocado salsa](#).

Prep, don't stress

By preparing for guests ahead of time, you'll not only want to host more people outdoors on your patio, you'll also be relaxed and ready to entertain if a neighbor comes knocking on your door to chat. Keep a decorative, weatherproof crate or wooden bin with a secure lid on the edge of your deck. That way, kids can keep all of their toys in one place and clean up quickly when guests arrive. You can even use multiple crates and have them handy for extra bench seating. Create a list of your grocery needs so you're not overwhelmed in the store. Dividing your list by appetizers, main courses and desserts will help you navigate. Make fresh produce last longer by storing it in the fridge rather than a fruit bowl, or creating ready-to-use plastic bags of frozen fruits for your smoothies.

So, call up your family and friends and let the summer fun begin!