

Take Your Balcony From Boring to Breathtaking in 4 Steps

Use plants, lighting and rugs to create a sense of privacy and comfort

by Merlisa Lawrence Corbett, **AARP**, February 26, 2021 | Comments: 0



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If you're an apartment or condo dweller and [COVID-19](#) is cramping your style, perhaps it's time to reimagine an often-ignored "room" in your home: the balcony.

Whether tiny or spacious, the balcony is a good place to experiment: Ditch the dull and transform your balcony from so-so to sensational.

"A balcony is a space that's part of your home and something that you usually pay extra to have. So why not make the most of it?" says Isabelle LaRue, 50, a building engineer turned balcony guru and creator of the web series *Engineer Your Space*. "You can be whimsical. You can try new things because it's outside."

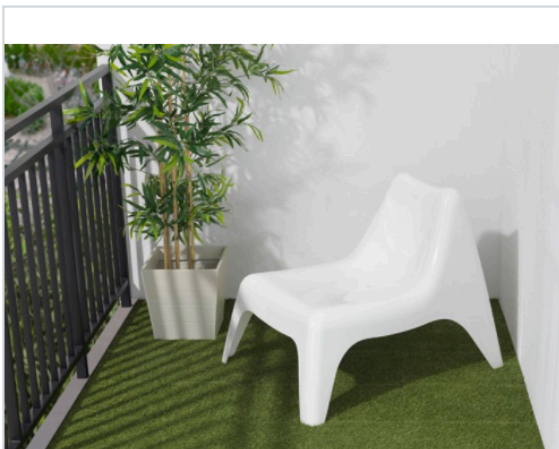
Lots of elements contribute to a balcony transformation, LaRue says, including privacy, comfortable seating, fabulous floors, plants and lighting. LaRue suggests people create an escape, [sort of a standing staycation](#).

"Make it feel like you're going somewhere else, like another room, another space entirely," LaRue says.

1. Create an outdoor sense of privacy and comfort

Wood panels, faux boxwood greenery and other materials are useful to create a sense of privacy, LaRue says. You can also use lattice panels, roller shades or weather-resistant fabric to screen your outdoor space from others.

When it comes to seating, big-box stores like Ikea, Home Depot and Lowes offer many outdoor options. "However, for those willing to put in a little bit of sweat equity, DIY benches and chairs are relatively quick and very inexpensive to build," says LaRue, who posts how-to videos for building benches [on her website](#).



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Floor coverings, like faux grass, can change the feel of a balcony.

Outdoor rugs come in all shapes and sizes. And if they're classified as outdoor-friendly, it means they are made from synthetic fibers such as nylon, polyester or polypropylene — a fade-resistant material that repels mold, mildew and stains. Rugs made from polypropylene can be hosed down and even bleached in place. Look for rugs constructed with a flat weave, which is more durable and less likely to shed fibers.

Ikea's Runnen tiles are a favorite for renters because they are easy to install and require no glue or hardware. They can be picked up and packed away for your next space. They come in wood-floor style, faux lawn and decorative tiles.

When it comes to lighting, LaRue likes to use a combination of string lights and candles. Consider vintage or globe Edison bulb string lights for a bolder, industrial modern look. Hang mini LED string lights vertically to create an illuminated wall. Make sure these lights are waterproof.

Candlelight on a balcony creates a beautiful ambiance, but left outside, candle wax melts and collects dirt and even bugs. To solve the problem, create a candle caddy by filling a shower or gardening caddy with your favorite candles, scented and unscented. Place candles out when using your balcony and then pack them up to take inside when you're done.

2. Balcony design for the way you live

More than anything, the balcony has to meet your needs. If your interior lacks [dining space](#), create a dining area, with a bistro table, chairs and side table for holding drinks or desserts. If you always wanted a special spot for reading, design a comfy nook by positioning a bench topped with thick seat cushions up against a wall or railing. Stack pillows across to create back support.

LaRue encourages people to quiz themselves on how the space will be used. Do you plan to dine with friends or use the space to find quiet time to unwind? What do you want the [outdoor living area](#) to look and feel like?

The balcony can be the exterior solution to interior issues, as long as it meets your needs and feels like a place of relaxation.

"If you're not comfortable in it, you won't use it, which, to me, defeats the purpose of spending all that time and effort in designing it in the first place," LaRue says.

A balcony is often a small space, so it's important to have the area do "double duty," says Kelley Proxmire, an interior designer based in Bethesda, Maryland. That means you might want a spot that works for cocktails but also to eat a meal.

"This can be accomplished by paying attention to the table height," she says, noting that 30 inches is the right height for dining. When a table isn't being used for eating, it can be repurposed to feature plants or floral displays.

3. Use the power of plants

Increasing the use of plants on your balcony invites nature in and helps create a restful and serene space. The type of greenery you'll be able to choose will depend on the climate where you live and whether your balcony gets mostly sun or shade, as well as the season.

"Be practical when selecting plants and potted plants for the balcony," Proxmire says. "If you do not have a green thumb, then stick to low-maintenance plants — ask your local nursery for suggestions."

Daniel Reyes and his wife, Sarah Hendley, own Lida's Jungle in St. Petersburg, Florida, which specializes in tropical and exotic plants. Reyes recommends people choose sun-tolerant plants that are interesting and unique. The *Euphorbia lactea* "White Ghost" is one of Reyes' favorites. The white cactus grows into a candelabra-like shape.

If space is tight, go vertical. A vine-covered trellis or lattice panel can provide privacy as well as a courtyard aesthetic.

"Wall-mounted plants are great because you can put different varieties on a wall," says Reyes, who recommends jungle cactus because it can tolerate the sun and some cooler temperatures.

In the winter, you can opt for lifelike artificial greenery such as panels of faux boxwood or ivy to line rails. If you prefer real plants, try English boxwood or Japanese plum yew, evergreens that can withstand freezing temperatures and look beautiful in pots.

As with any garden outdoor space, balconies can feature accents such as [potted plants](#), ornaments and water features. LaRue added a hummingbird feeder.

"That was a COVID summer addition and I wish I had put one up way sooner," LaRue says. "The tiny hummingbirds that stop by every day bring so much joy and life to my little balcony. I'm in love with these amazing creatures."

4. Consider the seasons

"Colder winter months may make it more challenging to make use of a balcony," especially since apartments usually prohibit the use of propane heaters, LaRue says. Instead, look to put sheepskins on benches and padding on furniture, and add warm wool blankets to your outdoor entertaining accessories.

"While this may not work in the dead of winter with subzero temperatures," La Rue says, "you'll at least be able to extend the use of the balcony."

Most importantly, "creating a functional, beautiful outdoor space should be about you," she says. "What brings you joy, how you love and what's important to you."

Merlisa Lawrence Corbett is a contributing writer who covers sports, interior design, business and human interest stories. A former reporter for Sports Illustrated and tennis columnist for Bleacher Report, her work has also appeared in Essence and Black Enterprise. She is the author of the biography Serena Williams: Tennis Champion, Sports Legend and Cultural Heroine.



KIP DAWKINS

Furniture will influence how a balcony is used.