

Grill Buying Guide



From burgers and hot dogs to full-flavor barbecue with all the fixings, nothing says summer like a backyard grill-out. Whether you're a grill master or new to the grates, choosing a new machine can be a daunting process.

This guide breaks down everything you need to know about buying a grill and choosing accessories so you can spend more time enjoying summer's favorite pastime—and less time wondering if you've got the right machine for the job.

Grill Types: Charcoal, Gas, Pellet, and Combination

Find the best type of grill for the food you enjoy cooking and your preferences for use and maintenance.

Charcoal grills

Traditional kettle grills are typically inexpensive, small, and portable. Charcoal is made from wood that has been burned down until it's nearly pure carbon, also known as char. The distinct taste of food cooked on charcoal grills comes from the drippings of the food landing on the hot coals. The drippings steam on contact, and all the fats, proteins, oils, and sugars rise back up as a flavor-packed vapor cloud to envelop the food.

With a charcoal grill, it's common to use briquettes or lump charcoal. Charcoal briquettes are uniform in size and usually contain a binder so the heat produced is relatively stable and controllable. Lump charcoal is burned-down hardwood that doesn't contain additives. Pieces aren't all the same size, so the heat is not as even.

Charcoal takes a while to warm up and sometimes needs tending to make sure the flames don't go out.

In addition, charcoal grills produce a lot of ash, making them one of the messier grill options. And while some grill masters swear by grilling over charcoal, the varying heat production can make it hard to gauge temperature for precise cooking.

Gas grills

A quick starter and simple clean-up—no need to handle charcoal—make gas grills a clear choice for many home cooks. Hitting specific temperatures and maintaining heat are easy, which can make cooking predictable and, for some, more enjoyable.

Gas grills can be hooked into a home's main gas line or fueled with refillable liquid propane tanks, making them an adaptable workhorse of the backyard barbecue.

Many gas grills tout extra features, such as side burners, bun warmers, and digital thermometers, elevating even the simplest outdoor meal.

Pellet grills

A pellet grill smoker brings together the flame-kissed taste of a charcoal grill, the ease and precision heat of a gas grill, and the electrical component of an oven. Hardwood pellets are fed into the grill through an automatic dispenser that distributes the exact amount needed to fuel the fire. An induction fan pulls in and circulates the heated air, creating an even heat, like a gas grill, and a controllable temperature, like a convection oven. The pellets give a smoky flavor as they burn, like a charcoal grill or electric smoker.

Pellet grills require electricity, meaning they're not portable, and they tend to fall in the higher end of grill price range.

Combination/hybrid grills

A combination or hybrid grill is exactly as what it sounds like: the best of both of worlds of gas and charcoal. You get the quick heat sourcing and reliability of a gas starter and low maintenance of a gas

grill along with the smoky, charbroiled taste that a charcoal grill imparts. Hybrid grills are a solid choice for grillers who want a lot of options for experimentation.

Most hybrid grill models include basic features to keep the price low and the unit a manageable size. Some models have the full features of both gas and charcoal grills. These can land higher on the price range because they offer so much adaptability and flexibility, however because they're larger, you can't move them around much. If you're looking for a hybrid grill, check the features lists, specifically the size of the charcoal tray and ease of switching between heat sources to make sure you're choosing a machine that will perform as you want it to.

Bottom Line:

- If you want a simple, fire-plus-food-equals-meal setup, go with the classic barrel charcoal grill.
- If you want easy start-up and minimal cleanup, you'll appreciate that gas grills require less maintenance and elbow grease.
- If you're a culinary pro or want to invest long term in your grilling craft, go with a quality pellet or hybrid grill to maximize your space and uses.

Special grill features

Grills have come a long way from the simple campfire models. Ease of use, practicality, and helpful additions can help you narrow down your grill options. As you're shopping, consider these features:

Heat Range

The key to grilling is learning how to manage and optimize indirect and direct heat sources in the grill in order to safely and thoroughly cook food. Some gas, hybrid, and pellet grills offer different heat range options to help you control the temperature for perfect cooking every time.

Portability

Some gas grills offer dual-fuel options, meaning you can hook it into the main gas line or switch to propane if you want to move the grill. If you plan to go the gas line route, consult your gas company for help setting it up.

Grate Material

No one wants a rust-covered burger. Stainless steel is a popular grate choice, but cast-iron is another strong contender because it provides more even heat distribution and a char taste.

Button Functionality (for Gas)

Newer models offer LED-lit digital controls and dials so you can better see what you're doing well after the sun goes down.

Premium Grill Features Worth Exploring:

- Side burners let you fry an egg or sauté veggies to accompany your grilled main course.
- Separate smoker chambers add smoky flavor to your food.
- Sliding utensil drawers can help you stay organized.
- Pull-out grease trays allow for easy cleaning.

Choosing Your Grill: Size Considerations

After you've chosen the type of grill and features you want, you should think about the ideal grill size for your unique setup and lifestyle. Your choice should depend on how many people you intend to feed, your outdoor space's dimensions, and personal barbecue preferences. Things to keep in mind include:

The Size of the Grill's Cooking Surface

The main cooking surface of a grill is measured in primary square inches; side burners and warmers are included in secondary square inches. Think about how you plan to use your grill to determine how

much grate space you'll need. If it's just burgers and hot dogs for the family, a smaller or mid-size grill will work just fine. If you entertain often or like to cook a variety of meats, vegetables, and other foods that all require different heat controls and more precision, invest in a larger and more outfitted model.

Your outdoor space

Scope out the size and shape of the space you have available for cooking in your yard or on your patio or deck. You'll want plenty of room to move around when cooking with open flames, and you won't want your outdoor seating area in the direct path of smoke.

In addition, locate your grilling area away from flammable items, like windowsills, patio furniture, and cloth items, like hammocks and aprons. Keeping your grill on a stable concrete surface is better than the lumpy ground. If your grill is on a deck or patio, be sure the coating is treated and nonflammable in case a spark flies out of your grill.

It's also smart to keep a small fire extinguisher nearby. Choose one designed for Class B (flammable gas or oil) or Class K (grease) fires. Never use water on a grease fire.

Storage Space for Your Grilling Gear and Supplies

Accessories like grill brushes, spatulas, charcoal, and ash canisters can be attractive to critters, so if you have these items, you'll need the right storage solutions. You can use a plastic or metal bin with a tight lid for open bags of charcoal and wood pellets. Always thoroughly clean anything that touches food before storing it, either in your kitchen or over an outdoor trash bin with a tight-fitting lid.