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# Plan a pretty party: How to make summertime entertaining a breeze

By Stacey Wiedower

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Clear globes serve as intriguing receptacles for flower blossoms as part of the "Summer Glow" decorations. Karin Woodward Haute Horticulture

A good host knows the most important rule for any party is to make sure guests are comfortable.

In Memphis in the summertime, that's easier said than done -- at least when the party is outside. But it's not impossible.

"A great theme right now for a party would be anything that's cool," said Addie McGowan, an event coordinator with Memphis-based event planning firm Social Butterflies. "Think ice water, watermelon or really cold, luscious fruit artfully arranged in a bed of ice."

For all the July 4 celebrations happening this weekend, there are plenty of ways to go beyond the typical flag-themed decor to create a party that's memorable for guests and keeps them comfortable, even in the searing heat.

"You can take it to a different level," said Social Butterflies co-owner Michelle Hope. "Just focus on the color red and don't do red, white and blue. Or have a character theme and hold a contest for the most patriotic or tackiest patriotic outfit. Make it a little different, so it's not just a backyard barbecue."

Other ideas?

Try putting a twist on the standard cookout fare and serving it gourmet-style, in bite-size portions offered to guests on trays. Not only does it elevate the atmosphere, but "keeping the food moving" also keeps away bugs, Hope said.

And although it's a little hot outside for an ice sculpture, a cool alternative would be shaped ice cubes -- round or novelty shapes



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Summer parties, large or small, benefit from attention to color, comfort and creativity. This "Summer Glow" themed wedding reception by Social Butterflies has all the essentials for a memorable party.



MICHELLE HOPE/SOCIAL BUTTERFLIES

This yellow decor by Social Butterflies event planners is aptly named "Lemon Luncheon." Something as simple and inexpensive as lemons can be the basis of a colorful and fresh theme.

are fun.

"Little details like that, that are in every person's hand, are going to be noticed more than expensive details off in the corner," McGowan said.

Even better, use the shaped cubes in a signature drink created just for the party. For a trendy, summer-themed example, McGowan suggested a "Firefly Martini" using Firefly Tea-Flavored Vodka. Mojitos, sangria and spiked lemonade are other great summertime choices, said Wade Hartsfield, owner of Wade & Co. Catering.

To implement the idea, find a cocktail recipe, mix a large batch (making sure to keep the proportions right) and keep it in a cooler or Thermos until ready to pour. Then, for show and to ensure each drink is icy cold, shake individual drinks in a cocktail shaker with ice before pouring them into guests' glasses.

"A signature drink is a really great way to create something memorable and enjoyable for your guests and also cut down on money," McGowan said. "And a way to get it noticed is to print a bar sign and put it in a cute picture frame next to the area where you're serving drinks."

To make sure you get to enjoy the party, too, Eads homeowner and frequent host Mark Giannini suggests calling in help. Giannini, CEO of IT outsourcing firm Service Assurance, often calls on Scott

DeLarme, friend and executive chef at Owen Brennan's, to cook or coordinate service.

"I learned a fair while back that if you're cooking and serving at your own party, then you're really not enjoying it," Giannini said. "I love to get people who work in restaurants because they know what's going on. It's very reasonable from a pricing standpoint, and it just makes the party fun for me, as opposed to cooking and working and running around."

There are other ways professional help can come in handy at a party, and they're not all budget-breakers. Party planners are often available on a consulting basis for do-it-yourself hosts. Also, rental companies offer everything from extra seating, to dishes and stemware, to Port-A-Cool units designed to help guests beat the heat.

"It's always wise to add some rental items" for a large gathering, Hope said. "Use what you have, but add a couple of extra rental tables and chairs. Just make sure you provide shade and a place for people to sit. Make a space where people want to hang out and stay a while."

Selection and price range for rental items run the gamut, McGowan said. Also, rental companies often can deliver items and pick them up, meaning you don't have to end the night by doing dishes.

Another way to make sure you enjoy your own party is to enlist help in your preparations, advised Memphian Nancy Lou Jones. Jones, who recently completed a term as president of the Memphis Symphony League, is an expert hostess who helps plan and judge the league's annual picnic contest at the spring Symphony in the Garden event at Dixon Gallery and Gardens.

"Make it a community kind of thing," she said. "Get the cooperation of your guests and make it fun for everybody to help and do it all together."

One way to do that, Hope said, is to hold a grilling contest. Advise guests ahead of time to bring their meat of choice, and have a grill cook-off where guests sample each others' grill fare and vote for their favorite. Then give a prize to the winner.

"They bring what they prefer to eat and you provide the grill and sides, which are less costly for you as the hostess," she said. "It gives people a chance to participate in the event and takes some of the stress off you."

As for decor, Italian festival lights (string lights) are trendy right now and a great source of nighttime illumination, Hartsfield said.

"They're fun and relatively inexpensive and add some ambience," he said. "You can find them online and at places like Target."

Hartsfield also suggested using old quilts as table overlays at a casual party or picnic.

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Forrest L. Wood Crowley's Ridge Nature Center

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Memphis Botanic Garden

**Fabulous Fine Art** 10 a.m.  
The Children's Museum of Memphis

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Jones said she keeps her eyes open throughout the year for items that might be useful for entertaining.

"If you see something, grab it up so you have it when you need it," she said. "I don't usually go out and do a whole lot of spending (to decorate for a party). But I do keep a stash in an upstairs closet of holiday-themed things that can be pulled out and used again."

**Tips for a Perfect Summertime Soiree:**

Keep it simple. Focus on one detail, suggests Michelle Hope of Social Butterflies. For example, lemons. Buy one bulk bag of lemons, use them to decorate in a variety of ways and build the color theme around them.

Make guests comfy. If you're hosting an outdoor party in July, think about what your guests need to stay comfortable. Provide bug spray and sunscreen. And consider freezing bottles of water (open them and pour out a little first) so they stay cold longer, advises Wade Hartsfield of Wade & Co. Catering.

Know your audience. If kids are coming to your party, give them something to do to keep them (and their parents) happy. Set out bottles of bubbles. Put a sandbox in a shady spot. Or set up an activity station -- for example, flag decorating for a July 4 party. That way, guests also get a keepsake from the event.

Consider logistics. For an outdoor party, set up drink stations in easy-to-access outdoor areas, suggests Eads homeowner Mark Giannini. That way, guests don't have to traipse in and out of the house for refills.

Seek advice. A coordinator can help you find ways to save money, not just cost you more, notes Social Butterflies' Addie McGowan. "We understand how an event budget adds up and know where the best bang for your buck will come from," she said.

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