

A gazebo adds a bit of romance ... or nice office space: Victorian revival: Many kits can be custom designed for versatility

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Illustration: Color Photo: Tyrel Featherstone, CanWest News Service / A glassed- or screened-in gazebo makes a pleasant retreat any time of year.

Of all the man-made structures you can put in a garden, few surpass an old-fashioned gazebo for sheer, unabashed romance.

Though possibly originally inspired by Chinese teahouses and garden pavilions, gazebos first began appearing in European gardens around the 17th century. But it is the Victorians, with their combination of practical-mindedness and love of decoration, with whom we most associate this old-fashioned, octagon-shaped garden shelter. Even the term itself is a bit of Victorian folly, intended for a time when familiarity with the Classics was more commonplace than it is now: If you could conjugate the English verb "to gaze" by the rules of Latin syntax, "gazebo" would translate as "I will gaze." (Admittedly, it sounds better in the original.)

Gazebos were, and are, generally recreational in purpose, placed so that those out strolling could stop and enjoy a pretty view, escape the hot sun or a sudden shower, or enjoy a quiet moment away from the rest of the household. Their position within an overall view was at least as important: Often, they were carefully incorporated into the composition of the garden, surrounded by flowerbeds and with a path or steps leading to the entry.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the gazebo is staging a comeback not seen since the days of long skirts and parasols. According to Wanda Searle of Limestone Trail, a Beamsville, Ont. company that supplies both finished gazebos and kits, "People are 'finishing' their landscaping, and now they're looking at ways they can get the most out of their properties, for entertaining or just living in a beautiful environment."

At the cottage, a gazebo is a perfect way to take advantage of a lakeside view. Enclosed by screens or glass panels, it becomes an extension of the house, protected not only from sun and rain but also from bugs -- a particular concern to consumers in the age of West Nile virus and a depleted ozone layer. A small gazebo makes a highly esthetic pool cabana, or you can incorporate it into the end of a deck, for sheltered alfresco dining. Even the tiniest downtown garden, Ms. Searle says, can accommodate one with surprising ease.

For Haroula Theodorakis of Summerwood Products in Toronto, part of the charm of the gazebo is its versatility, allowing you to customize the basic form for everything from home offices or guesthouses to children's playhouses and outdoor dining rooms. Summerwood's basic selection includes a variety of open, screened, and glassed-in designs, but you can exchange roof and side panels, add or subtract decorative trim, or even fully customize the gazebo if necessary. "We even had one customer who had the panels and windows specially adapted to winterize it, for use as a home office," she recalls.

Most gazebo companies offer pre-cut lumber, partially assembled kits with the more difficult sections such as the cedar shingle roof already completed, or provide full installation services. Prices depend on the configuration, style and level of customization, but Summerwood's selection starts from 2.5-metre kits at about \$3,200, up to nearly 10 times that for a top-of-the line seven-metre glass house. Limestone Trail's smallest three-metre gazebo sells for about \$6,800 installed, while a five-metre behemoth costs upward of \$15,000. (The company also sells a 10-sided "stretch" version, great for dining or sleeping, for a few thousand more.) Options such as screening and glass inserts can add a third to half extra to the base price.

Whether you opt for a practical screened or glassed-in version, or choose to simply install a traditional open-style gazebo at the end of the lawn, the old-fashioned romance is built in.