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AFTER A YEAR OF SOCIAL DISTANCING, HOMEOWNERS ARE EMBARKING ON STAYCATIONS IN THEIR OWN BACKYARDS, WHERE THEY'RE FREE TO ENTERTAIN SAFELY AND RECONNECT WITH NATURE



In Greenwich, James Doyle created a comfortable outdoor entertaining and dining space, complete with a reflecting pool.

THIS SPRING, THE “GREAT OUTDOORS” PROMISES TO BE EVEN GREATER—OR AT LEAST MORE WIDELY USED AND ENJOYED—THAN PERHAPS AT ANY OTHER TIME IN MORE THAN A CENTURY.

Thanks to a wealth of landscape design talent in our area, we’re able to shelter not only in place, but also in great comfort, safety and style. A number of the top architects, landscape architects and contractors in the county have created outdoor rooms for a range of functions in much the same way interior designers lay out indoor spaces. And in reconsidering the very idea of residential property, they’re expanding the outdoor living season from earliest spring to latest fall.

The coronavirus pandemic has had at least one positive effect. “Home has become a refuge for many people,” says Ryan Raveis, copresident of William Raveis Inc. “In essence, they’re investing in their homes, and they’re enjoying life more in the place where they live.”

Investment in property has helped fuel the hottest residential real estate market in decades, raising the average selling price by 20 percent. Real estate agencies in the county report as much as a 100 percent increase in business from this time last year.

“Part of the story has got to be New York buyers coming to Connecticut,” notes Paul Breunich, president and CEO of William Pitt and Julia B. Fee Sotheby’s International Realty, headquartered in Stamford. “They’re looking for more land, for lower density of population, for security. They’re flooding the market and demand is far exceeding supply.”

Yet even homeowners already settled in Fairfield County are trading out, if not up, for more space and more opportunities to live out of doors for as long as possible.

EXTERIOR DESIGN

In Rowayton, a couple with young children hired RAC Architecture + Design to design a new shingle-style contemporary in the beach association area that would take advantage of the property’s natural resources and the neighborhood’s active lifestyle.

“The clients really embraced the idea of entertaining outside,” says David LaPierre, a partner in the Westport firm. “They’re into the home as a sanctuary—they wanted to keep their kids close to them and have kids from the neighborhood come over and play.”

The 6,200-square-foot house is all about the outdoors.

At the back, an open porch with ample seating is warmed year-round by a fireplace and Infratech electric heaters embedded in the ceiling. Large sections of glass

in the interior dining room slide into pockets in the walls, and tall glass panels in the adjacent family room fold back, opening the interior to the exterior. There, steps from the house, are enough amenities to keep kids at home and guests angling for invitations:

a pool, hot tub, firepit and a full outdoor kitchen with grill, refrigerator, ice machine, sink and stainless-steel storage cabinets.

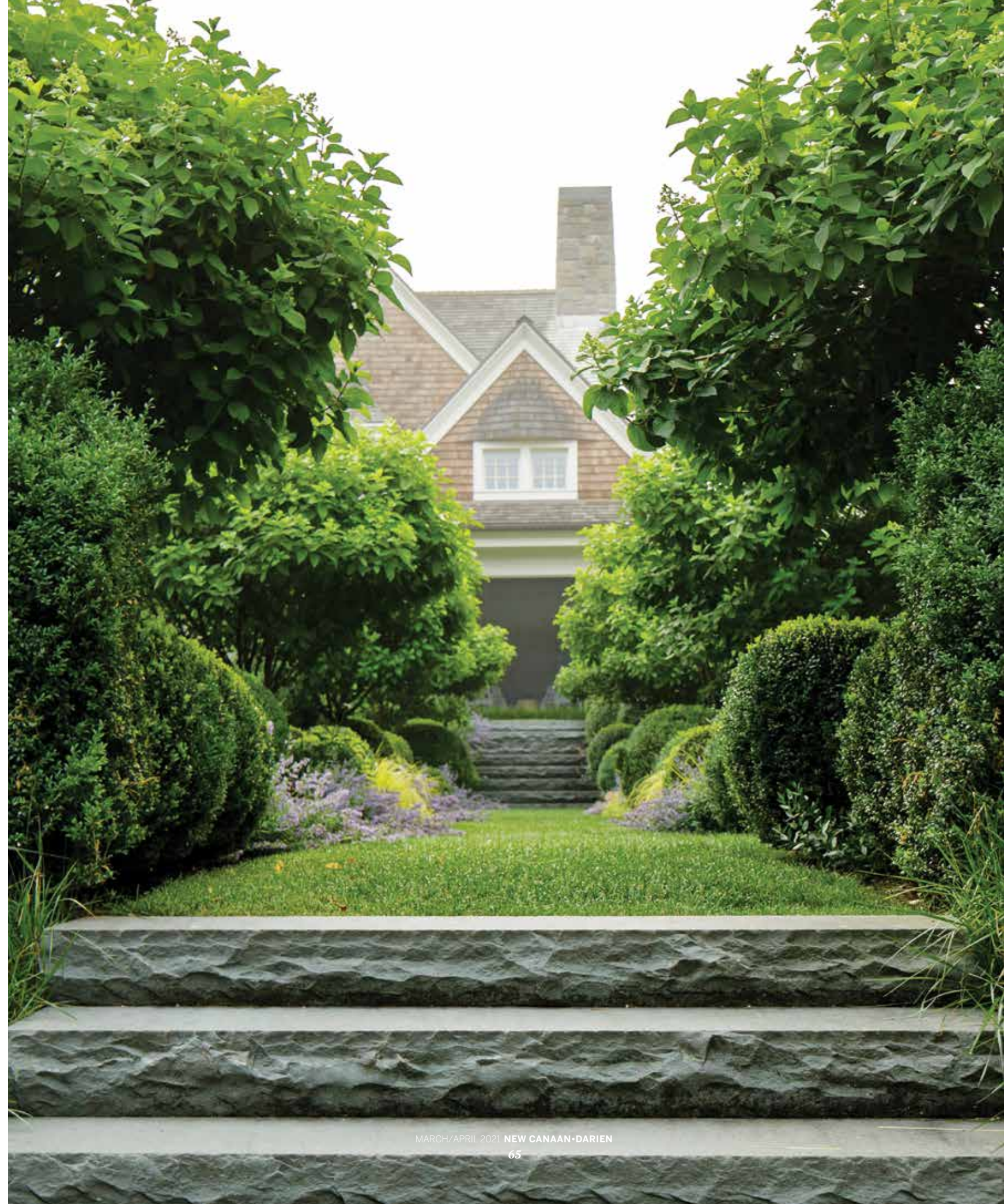
The owners of a modern Tudor mansion in the Belle Haven section of Greenwich called James Doyle Design Associates to

create a series of exterior rooms for dining and entertaining. The property falls away dramatically from the back of the house, leaving relatively little useable space, but that didn’t limit the landscape architect.

“You don’t need huge spaces to have well-designed, well-furnished, intimate outdoor spaces,” James Doyle explains.

After leveling the land with tiered steps, he created a long, narrow patio that’s still roomy enough for a dinner table, two seating areas, a reflecting pool with feeder stream and a firepit carved out of a single piece of bluestone.

An outdoor living room in Rowayton with fireplace designed by RAC Architecture + Design is made for year-round comfort and entertaining.



GRILLING ALFRESCO

Grilling has evolved since our ancestors first threw a mastodon steak on the firepit some 800,000 years ago (give or take a few hundred thousand). Since then, the “kitchen” has moved from the home cave to the great outdoors.

“Outdoor kitchens have always been popular,” says Dave Marsillio Sr. at Marsillios Appliances in Fairfield, “but now, with families being home much more due to Covid-19, they are looking to utilize more of their property.” Cooking outside can range from a basic grill or firepit to a covered patio, tiki bar or pool cabana. In these areas, customers are focusing on better equipment and higher-end units, just as they have inside the house.” (Last year, the company installed over 30 high-end units.)

Outdoor kitchens have also been steadily moving away from the house, notably to pool houses and cabanas. There, they’re likely to be accessorized with fireplaces or firepits, and embedded lighting and electric heating elements in the ceilings and supporting beams. A popular

request for these structures this spring, according to contractors, is outdoor pizza ovens.

“Architecturally and aesthetically, the pizza oven has become a focal point of outdoor living,” says Kevin Ambrosio of Ambrosio Landscape Solutions. “Restaurants have been installing brick pizza ovens and people want to recreate that at home. They’re also a reason for having friends over. Every week I’m meeting with someone who wants one.”

In Redding, he designed a cabana with pizza oven over a massive stone fireplace—a destination and dining experience that draw family members as well as guests without ever leaving home.

High-end outdoor kitchens—from brands like Viking, Lynx and Dynamic Cooking Systems—can run from \$5,000 to \$25,000 and above when adding stonework and what today are almost standard features: grills with smokers, heating trays and side burners; refrigerators, ice-makers and sinks; heaters and night lighting.



Outdoor pizza ovens like this one designed by Ambrosio Landscape Solutions are in higher demand than ever.

BACK TO THE GARDEN

A little over a century ago, in the wake of World War I and in the midst of the Spanish flu, Americans planted war or victory Gardens for self-sufficiency but also out of patriotic duty.

This season, landscape architects and professional gardeners report a resurgence of interest in suburban gardening and in simply getting back to nature. The benefits can be bountiful.

“Spending time outdoors is a great way to take off stress,” says James Doyle of James Doyle Design Associates in Greenwich. “It’s nice for people to have their phones turned off and just relax.”

Homeowners in Fairfield County are asking for pollinator plantings and pathways that attract butterflies, bees and songbirds as well as provide meditative spaces. They’re also interested in spending less time in the produce section of supermarkets and more time outside.



James Doyle Design Associates often creates gardens like this one for clients looking to relax and de-stress.

“The benefits go beyond the taste of the vegetables you grow,” notes John Carlson of Homefront Farmers in Wilton. The company designs, builds and maintains organic vegetable gardens in Connecticut and New York. “It’s about the satisfaction of the experience.”

The first step in planning a vegetable garden is determining

where on your property crops have the best chances of growing.

“When you create a new garden you want to start with a lawn area or field in full sun,” says Jack Disbrow a formal gardener in Wilton who makes and maintains residential gardens. “You’ll need at least six hours, but since Connecticut tends to be damp and damp means mold, the more sun

the better.”

From there, it’s a matter of homeowners learning about their soil, when to plant which vegetables, and how best to feed, mulch and weed. Or, as with most other aspects of creating outdoor spaces, experts like John Carlson or Jack Disbrow are available to do the spadework, leaving us to harvest the fruits of their labor.



HOME IS WHERE THE HEARTH IS

Heat in any form can extend the outdoor living season by a month or more on either side of summer. Given the chill of a winter of uncertainty and anxiety, warmth of any kind is welcome this spring.

Firepits of all shapes and sizes, like this one designed by Robert Cardello, are a hit for those looking for some drama (and heat) in their outdoor spaces.

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GARDEN BY NEIL LANDINO; FIREPIT BY DANIEL MILSTEIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Outdoor fireplaces are bringing the warmth of the indoors to backyards, often in dramatic fashion. Overlooking Candlewood Lake in Danbury, Kevin Ambrosio of Ambrosio Landscape Solutions designed a spacious exterior family room—complete with grill, refrigerator, wide-screen television and comfortable seating—around a brick and stone fireplace, all set in a high stonewall with upper trellis.

But firepits may be the hotter items on the backyard wish-list this season, and for a number of reasons: They’re relatively inexpensive; they can be sited anywhere on a property; with a few seats drawn up around them, they become instant and welcoming

gathering spots; and they extend outdoor living for all but the bitterest winter days and nights.

Back in Rowayton, a 16-foot-long firepit across from the swimming pool’s transparent outer wall illuminates and warms the lineup of low, soft seating between it and the pool.

In Darien, a heated bluestone path leads from the back of a 6,000-square-foot house to an outdoor spa so that family members and guests can walk barefoot even in winter. Beyond the spa is a large, circular, stone-walled room with firepit that is used year-round by a family that spends the coldest months playing hockey on a pond at the

bottom of the property.

Molly O’Brien Watkins in the Darien office of William Pitt Sotheby International listed the property for a family that had the house built for outdoor entertaining. Polly Hickox of William Raveis Real Estate in Darien sold it to a New York family looking for...a yard.

Custom-designed firepits, including masonry work, can cost \$4,000 for wood-burning units and as much as \$6,500 for gas-burning.

Outdoor fireplaces cost considerably more, from \$15,000, by Ambrosio’s estimate, to \$25,000.

Molly O’Brien Watkins in the Darien real estate office of William Pitt Sotheby says that homes with outdoor entertaining spaces have major sales appeal.





Austin Ganim Landscape Design in Fairfield created a border wall and bed of perennials and annuals that bloom throughout the season to add interest around the pool and spa.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

The hottest commodities this season are swimming pools and spas. Both are typically in demand this time of year, contractors say, but what has changed this spring is the number of people demanding them.

"We're usually booked two to four months in advance, but as of the end of last September we are booked out a year, and that has never ever happened before in the pool industry," says Tim Meehan at Meehan & Ramos Pools in Stratford. "And that's happening because four walls are four walls, no matter if they're in a 10,000-square-foot house or 2,000-square-foot house. People have to get outside and there's no greater outside experience than a swimming pool."

Cool pool and spa features this

season include seamless edges, automatic covers, smart lighting and remote controls, outbuildings like pool houses and pergolas, and small dipping pools—"cocktail pools" or "spools," as they're being called.

On the Rowayton Beach Association site, the rear of the property slopes precipitously down to the beach. To provide useable family space, LaPierre and firm founder Robert Cardello created two flat tiers for entertaining, exercising and relaxing. On the lower level, the pool's outer wall is laminated glass, visually expanding the enclosure while allowing swimmers both to be seen and to see the waters of Long Island Sound in the distance.

Hardscapes such as swimming

pools are softened by landscaping that can also provide privacy, shade, color and beauty.

For a Meehan & Ramos pool and built-in spa in Westport, Eva Chiamulera, the senior landscape architect at Austin Ganim Landscape Design in Fairfield, designed a border wall and bed of perennials and annuals that blossom and bloom throughout the extended season. The natural backdrop Emerald Green arborvitae provides privacy and a sense of safe-distancing, as does the pool house far from the main house and other outdoor rooms.

No matter where or how it flows, water also softens suburban property and draws family members and friends.

"In these troubled times, water is a very calming and soothing

element in the landscape," says James Doyle. Pools and spas, he adds, "are a great way to get teenagers to come home because that's where they're going to hang."

Water runs through much of the firm's work. For a modern house in the Belle Haven section of Greenwich, a spine of black zone carries a narrow stream from the front courtyard, through the house, out a spout at rear and into a trough running alongside the pool.

A high-end pool—when it can be installed, that is—can run anywhere from \$100,000 to more than \$500,000 depending on site-work, size, materials and features. These days, however, the benefits seem to outweigh the cost. What's more, given the high demand, any expenditures are likely to be recouped when the house sells.

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HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

With team sports and youth recreation schedules scaled back for the spring season, Fairfield County residents are hiring landscape architects and contractors to create playing fields and a range of semi-professional-looking courts, rinks and cages.

"Sport courts are really popular right now," Kevin Ambrosio says. "Parents want to give their kids the opportunity to succeed in sports. They're gathering friends and hiring coaches to come to their house, so they need a basketball court or a hockey rink or a batting cage." (To give themselves the opportunity to succeed in golf meanwhile, parents are opting for chipping and putting greens.)

Often, these spaces require a fair amount of perfectly flat ground, which in turn requires substantial clearing and grading. In Westport, Ambrosio's crew installed a batting cage 12 feet high, 14 feet wide and 60 feet long, floored with AstroTurf and completely enclosed in strong netting. In Greenwich, they constructed a half-sized basketball court with the Michael Jordan logo and two layers of coated asphalt.

Batting cages at this level can cost upwards of \$20,000, high-end basketball courts from \$20,000 to \$60,000. Ambrosio's company designs, builds, gets necessary permits and maintains projects for clients.

Yet for plain, old-fashioned child's play—aimlessly kicking a ball, flying a kite, hitting something with a stick, lying on a blanket looking at the clouds—leveled sections of a yard frequently suffice.

"The big, open lawn is a request we're seeing more and more of because people want flat play spaces for their children," says James Doyle. For the Greenwich home with dramatically sloping backyard, his firm graded and seeded a large expanse of the property. Three sets of handsome stone steps, softened in between by banks of wild grasses, serve as a natural-looking transition from the upper terraces to tennis courts below.

The cumulative effect of all these elements and features is to extend the seasons well beyond the time to come inside for the winter. With heated porches and paths, remote-control spas, and fireplaces and firepits, we may not need to go indoors again until the swimming pool freezes over—and maybe not even then.



above: James Doyle says he has received more requests for large, open lawn spaces to allow for more play space for clients' children. **below:** Ambrosio installed this completely enclosed batting cage in Westport.



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