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CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO BUYING A HOT TUB

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FOR CENTURIES, PEOPLE HAVE FLOCKED TO NATURAL SPRINGS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE 'CURATIVE' PROPERTIES OF BATHING IN ITS HOT WATER.

Today, people around the world continue to agree that nothing seems to soothe the aches and pains of a hard day's work like a hot soak. While natural hot springs are tough to find, modern homeowners can easily bring this experience to their backyards with a hot tub. Buying one, however, can be overwhelming, given the number of styles and added features available on the market today. As with many major purchases, perhaps the best way to approach buying a hot tub is to put together a checklist of the specifications and features you want and then rate the hot tubs you see accordingly.

Being prepared will help you avoid getting caught up in 'deal of the day' promotions one of the worst things you can do as a customer or feel pressured into making a purchase before you're ready.

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IF YOU DO YOUR HOMEWORK, YOU CAN ENSURE YOU'LL BUY THE HOT TUB THAT BEST SUITS YOUR NEEDS.

The first rule of hot tub shopping is not to get fooled by the bells and whistles designed to distract you. As a consumer, there are five basic things you should look for when buying a hot tub:

1. COMFORT AND DESIGN
2. REPUTATION
3. INSULATION
4. MASSAGE CAPABILITIES
5. EASE OF MAINTENANCE

1

COMFORT AND DESIGN

Above all else, you want your hot tub to be comfortable; otherwise, you might not use it at all. There are many contributing design factors that can make a hot tub more or less comfortable for bathers.

First, check to see if the hot tub seats are ergonomically designed to fit your body's natural curves. You need to make sure you fit comfortably into the seats in order to get the best possible soaking and massage experience. If the hot tub has lounger seats that place you in a reclined position while your feet remain on the floor check to see if they non float loungers.

If the lounger isn't deep enough or you can't properly position your body in the seat, you may float out of it.Don't be afraid to climb in and test out the seats. Even better, ask to do a 'wet test,' in which you sit in a fully operational version of the hot tub. If a seat is not comfortable when it's dry, odds are it won't be any more comfortable when it is wet. You should also take a close look at other design features of the hot tub. For example, is there multi-level seating so all body types are able to sit in it? Does the hot tub have a large enough foot well to accommodate multiple bathers?

Are there safety steps to enter the hot tub, or are you forced to step on a seat when climbing in? Also inquire whether the hot tub can be sold with or without a cabinet. In other words does the cabinet support the hot tub or does it have a self-supporting cradle, that allows the customer to install the hot tub without a cabinet. This style of installation is very common in high end projects either inside or outside as it allows the designer the ability to finish the hot tub the way they want to ie, in ground, in a floor etc.

Even minor features should be studied. For instance, if the hot tub comes with pillows, ensure they are comfort-able and easy to remove and clean. Check to see if there is a place to put an ice bucket or place drinks. No detail is too insignificant.

2

REPUTATION

LOOK FOR HOT TUB MANUFACTURERS THAT HAVE BEEN IN BUSINESS FOR A WHILE AND HAVE A PROVEN RECORD OF RELIABILITY. THE INTERNET IS A GREAT PLACE TO START.

Check out the company's website and do a quick search for independent reviews of their products. You can also ask friends or family members with hot tubs about their experiences with particular models. You should also take into consideration where the manufacturer is located (e.g. in or outside of your province, in or outside of Canada) this makes getting parts and service a lot easier if for what ever reason the retailer stops carrying the hot tub brand that you purchased and ensure they are supported by a reputable retailer and distributor.

Also, investigate whether the products they offer are covered by a reasonable warranty. Look for companies that don't charge extra for Trip fees when doing a warranty call also be careful of the small print a lot of warranties are pro-rated in the industry. A good warranty would consist of a 10 year structural warranty, 5 year acrylic surface and 3 year parts and labour warranty. When it comes to hot tub retailers, many of the same criteria apply. Investigate how long the store has been in business and whether it is a member of any profes-sional associations. Research the company online to determine its reputation, including a search for customer reviews, referrals or complaints.

Of course, visiting the store on a fact-finding mission can also be helpful. Speak with a salesperson to see if they take the time to determine what hot tubs would best suit your particular needs, or just push products on you without asking questions. Check to see if the store has an onsite water testing lab and either an in-house or outsourced service department for ongoing maintenance support. Also inquire about the store's warranty policies—always look for a written warranty and be sure to ask whether the retailer charges an extra fee on every warranty service call. If you decide to buy from a sales representative at a home show, parking lot sale or other type of one-off event, be sure to ask whether the seller has a bricks-and-mortar retailer that can support you with a warranty and service department.

3

INSULATION

THIS FACTOR IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE OF ITS LINK TO ENERGY EFFICIENCY, AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION FOR ANY HOME-OWNER LOOKING TO PROTECT THE PLANET OR SAVE MONEY ON EVER-RISING ENERGY COSTS.

First and foremost, look for a hot tub that is approved by the Commission for Environmental Co-operation (CEC), a North American body that addresses regional environmental concerns, helps prevent potential trade and environmental conflicts and promotes the effective enforcement of environmental law. Investigate how long it takes for the hot tub to pump out and filter 100 per cent of its water. The less time this takes the more energy-efficient the hot tub will be.

Also look for models that use low-amperage filtration pumps. A good hardcover can also provide added insulation and energy efficiency. The industry standard is a 50 to 76-mm (2 to 3-in.) tapered cover; however, a tapered 76 to 101-mm (3 to 4-in.) cover will more effectively retain heat. Also, look for a hardcover with an insulated bumper around the folded area, as that is where you will lose most of your heat. Adjustable vent-ing is another factor to consider. Any hot tubs that use a heat lock technology (which uses the motor's waste heat to warm up the hot tub water during the winter) needs to be able to release some of the heat, especially in summer. Hot tubs that offer adjustable venting will allow you to vent heat in the summer and trap it in the winter. In addition to energy concerns, proper insulation will also help guard against rodents, who love a warm place to live in the winter. Make sure your hot tub has a sealed cabinet and a plastic floor to ensure these unwelcome visitors cannot take up residence.

4

MASSAGE CAPABILITIES

LIKELY THE MOST APPEALING ELEMENT OF A HOT TUB IS ITS MASSAGE CAPABILITIES. WHEN ADDED TO THE SOOTHING FEEL OF HOT WATER, IT CAN TRULY MAKE OR BREAK YOUR HOT TUB EXPERIENCE.

As such, it is important to learn as much as you can about this aspect before buying. The jets are the most vital variable of the massage equation. Look for jets that do not have any bearings in them, as these can corrode quickly.

Also, though it may be tempting to go for the model with the most jets, more is not always better. Instead, look for jets that are strategically placed in the most optimal spots. A few properly arranged jets can be far more effective than dozens of random ones. For example, foot jets are often overlooked, even though they can provide one of best possible massages.

Customization is also a much sought-after feature when it comes to jets. Ask your retailer about the customization options the manufacturer offers. For example, can you add or remove jets? Can you swap out one type of jet for another, even after you've made your purchase? There is nothing worse than sitting in front of a jet that irritates your back. Also, look for a model with optimized hydraulics to ensure an even flow of water is provided to each jet for a smooth, comfortable massage.

5

EASE OF MAINTENANCE

No matter what hot tub you choose, you need to make sure it is easy to service. The last thing you want to do is pull the hot tub out of a deck and flip it on its side every time service is required. Ask the salesperson to show you where technicians can access vital systems (and keep these details in mind when considering where to place the hot tub in your backyard). When it comes to hot tub maintenance, there are two primary factors you need to address - filtration and disinfection.

FILTRATION

In a hot tub, dirt can only do two things. It is either light enough to float on the surface or heavy enough to drop to the bottom. When assessing a hot tub's filtration capabilities, but sure to ask how long it takes to filter 100 per cent of the water.

Also check to ensure the skimmer is sufficient. Does it provide enough filtration to remove debris and does it have a floating door to skim the surface of the water? Also, does it come equipped with a floor vacuum to clean the dirt off the bottom of the hot tub? If not, you will have to purchase a separate vacuum. Also ask the salesperson whether the hot tub has a suction side filter or pressure side filter. The suction side filter offers less expensive filtration, but is not as effective; it will only filter 50 per cent of the hot tub water. Conversely, pressure side filters are more expensive, but since 100 per cent of the water passes through the filter, all of it can be cleaned.

DISINFECTION

To keep your hot tub safe and pleasant to use, you will also need to disinfect the water regularly. Ideally, look for a hot tub that has an in-line chemical feeder as opposed to a floating dispenser.

While floating dispensers work well, they also need to be removed every time someone enters the hot tub. If you choose to use an ozone system, which is designed to reduce your overall chemical requirements, look for a model that uses an injection system. This technology reduces off -gassing and increases the ozone's saturation and killing power.

If you opt for a saltwater bromine system (which uses saltwater to generate chemicals for disinfection), be prepared for a bit of a learning curve. Make sure your retailer truly understands these unique systems and embraces the technology. Once you under-stand the system, it will be easy to use and should make a for a very pleasant soaking experience.

GO FORTH AND SHOP

Although looking for a hot tub can be confusing at times, you can make the process less complicated by narrowing down your search criteria to the above five areas. By finding a retailer you trust and walking in armed with this knowledge, you can surely find the hot tub of your dreams.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF HOT TUBS

There are two hidden costs to buying a hot tub that most retailers won't discuss—installation and electrical hook-ups. It is vital that you understand the costs of these two expenses.

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INSTALLATION

In general, you should budget between $500 and $1,500, depending on where you are going to place your hot tub and whether you will be using a concrete pad, deck or patio stones to support it. When deciding where to install the hot tub, consider the following questions:

1. Will the location provide you and your guests with enough privacy?
2. Does the location provide the proper support for the hot tub?
3. Will it be easy for the retailer to deliver the hot tub?
4. Can the hot tub be easily serviced if something goes wrong?
5. Is there a place nearby to put a hard cover when it is removed?
6. What view will bathers have when sitting in this location?
7. Does the location make is easy to get in and out of the hot tub?
8. Is the hot tub close enough to an electrical source to ensure an easy hook up?

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER ARE...

ELECTRICAL HOOK-UP
On average, this second hidden expense will cost you roughly $1,200. However, this can vary quite drastically, especially if you require any upgrade to the electrical panel. Keep this in mind when figuring out your budget. To get a better idea of the overall amount, ask the salesperson about the hot tub's electrical requirements and compare them to what your panel can provide.

AN ABUNDANCE OF OPTIONS
While there are certain basics by which to guide your hot tub search, there are also some unique add-ons to consider when comparing models. These are just a few of the more popular upgrades on the market today. Fragrance Dispenser: This allows you to use specially designed spa fragrances in your hot tub, to add an element of aromatherapy to your soak. This can take your hot tub from a mere luxury to a multi-faceted wellness centre.

WATER FEATURES: These add-ons (e.g. waterfalls, streams, etc.) can add both esthetic and therapeutic benefits to your hot tub.

AIR THERAPY: These systems inject numerous tiny air bubbles into the water to provide a full-body massage. If you choose this type of feature, make sure it uses heated air; there is nothing worse than having cool air ruin your hot tub experience.

LIGHTS: Colour therapy can be a beneficial addition to the massage and wellness experience. All hot tubs have a standard number of lights; it is up to you whether you add more lights to add to the experience. A couple of different options for lighting could be cabinet lighting or even some top lip lighting

TIPS FOR CHOOSING A HOT TUB LOCATION
As stated previously in the article choosing the right location is integral in the hot tub experience.

There are a number of options and accessories that can be purchased to help add to this.

1. **GAZEBOS:** This is a great addition to any backyard that requires some privacy, protection from the elements or entertainment.
2. **BARS AND SERVING LEDGES:** Great for entertainment. Not everyone wants to get into the hot tub at a party, bar ledges allow for customers to enjoy the hot tub experience without having to get into a bathing suit.
3. **COVANA:** A mix between a cover and a gazebo, this accessory is the perfect fit for all needs.

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