DESIGN & DECORATING

Velvet That Can Get All Wet

New sumptuous outdoor textiles can hang out on the patio all summer, no matter what befalls them.

By Courtney Barnes

Indoor-outdoor fabric of yore offered little in the way of luxury. Simplicistic patterns and limited colors kept a lid on style, and textures ranged from scratchy to sticky. “I remember they were rough to the touch and very stiff,” said New York designer Phillip Thomas of the patio materials of his youth.

In the last 15 years, however, the indoor-outdoor textile industry has literally gone soft, offering plushier options that can weather the elements. “When I started decorating, there was no such thing as an outdoor velvet,” said Alex Papachristidis. Today, the New York designer uses this seductive cloth wherever his clients might be sitting down in a wet bathing suit. He covered the sofa in his own Bridghampton, N.Y., pool house with a chocolate-brown all-weather gaufrage velvet from Lee Jofa. “I wanted the fabric to be elegant yet inviting and soft on the skin,” he said.

Performance fabrics, made of hard-wearing, solution-dyed acrylics and treated blends, have been available for decades. But as backyards have stylistically and functionally morphed into outdoor living rooms, textile manufacturers such as Sunbrella and Perennials have met the demand for weather-resistant but chic fabrics. Workhorse cloths that resist mold and mildew now resemble their conventional cousins. They feature the luxuriant feel of corduroy and velvet, elegant linen-like weaves, and sophisticated color and pattern choices beyond cabana stripes and stain-camouflaging florals. You can reupholster furniture you already own. Or choose one of the new fabrics when creating pieces with a designer. Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware offer them, too.

Portland, Ore., designer Max Humphrey said he and his clients marvel at the broad selection of styles now available in high-tech fabrics: “Mock linens that really do feel and look like fine linen, haute hippie stripes, ikats, bandanna patterns, fresh ginghams.” California textile designer Peter Dunham’s new collection of performance velvets adds paisleys and other global motifs to that range, Mr. Humphrey notes.

As indoor-quality textiles have migrated outside, so have outdoor fabrics become the go-to inside fabric for people with children—or messy friends—because homeowners no longer have to settle for the mundane.

Young families have driven the evolution of these fabrics, said Chicago designer and manufacturer Holly Hunt, whose recently debuted outdoor Moray chaise (pictured, top) can be covered in one of her performance velvets or linens in dirt-daring colors such as pale gray and ivory.

These hearty, texturally pleasing fabrics, many of which can be cleaned with bleach, let parents furnish homes in hues heretofore reserved for the childless: “Our clients are shocked when we present a scheme with white interior upholstery that can stand up to toddlers,” said designer Joe Nahem, of New York’s Perennials. Four years ago, the firm covered the sofa, chairs and dining banquette of a family of five’s Miami apartment in white, including Chella Fabric’s Montecatri in creamy Alabaster. Mr. Nahem, who recently visited, said of the upholstery, “It still looks new.”

Pale teals also hold up well. Los Angeles interior designer Kerry Joyce offers multi-colored, such as dusty violet, celery and pale blue, in his high-performance line, noting that because the acrylics are infused with pigment when still liquid polymers, “the fabrics retain their color in the sun and after many cleanings.”

Designer Mr. Humphrey recently styled a photo shoot of materials created by Sunbrella together with Oregon heritage textile brand Pendleton. “The plaid looks and feel like a really comfy vintage flannel shirt,” he said, adding that the signature Pendleton styles, modeled after Native American blankets, feel like soft natural fiber because they are woven, not printed.

“At my own house, I started using Perennials ‘cottons’ for durability and easy clean up,” said furniture designer Glenn Lawson, half of L.A. team Lawson-Fenning.

“We liked the feel so much we used it on dining chairs and floor pillows, which can now be easily brought outside for entertaining,” he said. “Most people can’t tell the difference between the high-performance and conventional fabrics.”

From left: Delany & Long Outdoor Leather, $22 per sq. ft., D & D Bldg., 212-759-5408 ext. 204; Sommers, $135 per yd., Modaleur Weinrib, 212-414-5978; Dedar Tricot Tressage, $179 per yd., D & D Bldg., 212-759-5408 ext. 204; Rocky Performance Velvet, $118 per yd., Schumacher, 800-523-1200; Lulu DK Jil Fabric, $248 per yd., Duralee, 800-275-3872.