

Does yours help you connect with your inner Neanderthal? Is it a work of urban chic or sculptural whimsy? Naturally, I'm inquiring after your fire pit. This year's hot garden ticket is a glorified brazier whose main job is keeping the cold at bay.

Originally from America, fire pits came to our shores about five years ago, igniting British ardour by making our damp, chilly gardens hospitable during summer evenings. An increased choice of contemporary pits has fanned the flames of their popularity further, and now design insiders are calling a trend.

The online homeware store Houseology stocks six brands of fire pit. Since last year, its chief executive, Kate Mooney, has increased its range from 31 models to 78 — and in the year to date, sales have soared by a staggering 1,128%. "It's the accessory of the season," she says.

At the nation's favourite flower show, the designs causing sparks to fly were by Andrew Gage, of the Firepit Company. The Suffolk farmer's day job is raising Gressingham ducks for Waitrose. Having inherited his grandfather's farm at the age of 19, he quickly developed an entrepreneurial bent, set up the poultry business and began looking for extra sources of income. "I've always had to do other things to make the farm work," he says. "The fireballs have been far and away our most successful enterprise."

He made half a dozen of these globes (pictured far right), drawing artworks on

6mm sheets of metal, then meticulously plasma-cutting them to make silhouettes, before being invited to Chelsea three years ago. Since then, he has received commissions from celebrities and royalty. Attracted by his balls of steel, Princess Anne took a business card when she visited his stand this year.

Gage views the terrible puns his work gives rise to as a bonus. On Facebook, he posted: "Monty Don filming next to our stand just now, I could tell he was distracted by my balls..." Does the gag ever pall? "Well, my wife limits me to three ball jokes a day. I get stern looks if I go over quota."

Putting such matters to one side, what are 2016's hottest buys? Mooney says Houseology's customers tend to add accessories such as grills, so the fire pit can be converted into a barbecue. Its bestsellers include the Zero, by Ak47 Design (pictured right), and the concrete-effect rectangular pit by Happy Cocooning, with stainless-steel gas burners.

For a pit purist, however, a gas burner is a step too civilised, says Simon S Ray, managing director of Encompassco. This year, he introduced Sebios, a Dutch brand, to the UK. His clients are particularly taken with the rusty patina of Cor-Ten steel in designs such as Senna. "Cor-Ten is pretty popular," he says. "It blends well into garden surroundings and it's durable. It's mostly known as architectural steel. Or in sculpture — you see it in the Angel of the North."

"A fire pit is an elemental thing. It brings out the caveman in us. A gas flame is all very well, but the guys especially like to have a real fire. It's a really convivial, social thing, sitting around a wood fire."



New to the UK, Viteo's concrete fire bowl is shown here with the firm's sleek Corian seating (Pure Luxury lounge set; sofas from £4,435 including delivery). The oval bowl is 80cm long and 63cm wide. £950; encompassco.com



Designed by Oscar van Buijtene for Sebios, the Senna fire pit features an "exploded star" decoration, created with high-pressure water cutting technology. In 3mm Cor-Ten steel, it's set on a tripod base, with a removable grate. 75cm diameter £849, 130cm diameter £2,195; encompassco.com

Paul Ott



Solus Decor's hemispherical concrete shells bear little relation to traditional fire pits. Tamed and domesticated for the elegant terrace, the Hemi 36 (91.5cm diameter) is an architectural feature and focal point. It's powered by biofuel or gas, not wood. Biofuel £2,650, natural gas or bottled propane £3,150; solusdecor.co.uk

A simple barbecue doesn't cut it any more — fire pits bring the wow factor to your garden and unleash your inner caveman. By Katrina Burroughs

Feel the

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Ak47 Design is top gun for contemporary fire pits, brilliantly combining rustic and industrial textures with clean, modern silhouettes. This woodburning model, Ercole Natural, has an oxidised steel frame with a circle of concrete hearth slabs on top (150cm diameter). It can be converted into a barbecue with Ak47's grill kit. £4,900; houseology.com



In sanded solid steel, which will rust naturally over time, Arpe Studio's Somma fire pit (45cm diameter) is a handsome, no-frills model. £249; notonthehighstreet.com

What your fire pit says about you

Yours is... a monumental model in a manly material such as Cor-Ten steel or blackened iron. Fuel is scavenged from the woods. Nobody gets to feed the flames but you, the Fire Maker.

It says... you could break boulders with Fred Flintstone.

Yours is... reminiscent of a brazier where hobos gather to chafe their fingerless gloves. Fuel is sourced from skips; in an emergency, charcoal from the petrol station is allowed.

It says... you have a natural talent for urban bushcraft. If Ray Mears were lost in Slough, he would come to you for advice.

Yours is... a luxury designer creation, elegant and modern. The pale concrete shell, with its artfully imperfect surface, was specced by your interior designer. To avoid nasty, smoky smuts, you've chosen to light it up with LEDs instead of logs.

It says... "My outdoor room is better than your indoor rooms." And probably cleaner.

Yours is... fully functional. You have invested in the grill kit for the top and chosen a gas-fired model, so it's a barbecue/fire pit hybrid — supremely practical for family gatherings and, with its all-weather cover, easy to keep clean.

It says... how civilised you are. Of course, you have utterly missed the point of a fire pit. Fred Flintstone and Ray Mears say you're a loser. But they still come over to eat your burgers.

The floral motifs of this orchid fireball are drawn by hand, then plasma-cut, in a workshop on Andrew Gage's Suffolk farm. Available in 65cm, 80cm and 90cm diameters, it starts at £949 for a natural metal finish. An LED kit to snazz up the ball when it's not in use costs £50. thefirepitcompany.co.uk

burn

The Glammfire Stravaganza (168cm diameter), in rusted Cor-Ten, has a lacquered carbon-steel interior and a stainless-steel fuel compartment. It burns charcoal or wood, and turns into a barbecue with the addition of a grill. It can also be lit with an LED kit. £13,500; houseology.com



There's no need to splash out on a bells-and-whistles creation: many designs are just simple metal burners. The Cross Tân fire pit (80cm diameter) is made in Wales from laser-cut and folded mild steel. £230; notonthehighstreet.com



For functional fire pits, look no further than Lakeland. This Dancook stainless-steel fire pit and barbecue (78cm diameter) can be fuelled by wood or charcoal, and can stand outdoors all year round without rusting. £190; lakeland.co.uk