

If you are one of those perky chicks born to be a perfect hostess, do take care to muss something up just as your guests arrive. Take off your shoes. Meet them at the door with wine bottle in hand. Smudge your tot with a little hollandaise. It's summer, baby, time to let a little something hang out.

And do it outside.

"If you look too finished, perfect makeup, hair, crisp outfit, flowers artfully arranged, dinner already finished and getting cold, well then you are imposing an un-fun atmosphere on your guests," says Sarah Bancroft of Douglas Park, Vancouver, who with her chef husband, Murray, prefers Sunday luncheons in the garden to loaded Friday-night dinner parties.

"It is your duty to put them at ease. And if that means dropping a ladle in the soup, so be it."

Casual is the word for entertaining with style this summer. For Bancroft, Fashion magazine's western editor, that means champagne, the secret ingredient of any outdoor gathering. "People always rise to the occasion. I find my guests are more coherent at 2 in the afternoon."

Think South of France bistro: terra cotta pots, long sunny afternoons, market-fresh food and a laissez-faire attitude. "The bistro garden is a challenging trend, but highly functional," says Adam Gracey of GA Gracey and Associates, a Toronto-area design/build landscaping firm. "We are seeing a desire for outdoor kitchens, combining an outdoor prep area and eating area."

Gracey's firm won honours at the Canada Blooms show in Toronto



this year for a bistro-inspired garden in which lemons and artichokes were design elements. "The potager garden blended vegetables and herbs along with a cutting garden," Gracey says, so you can make your centrepiece and your salad at the same time.

Suzanne Cohon, a noted Toronto hostess who just had a daughter, seven-week-old Parker, threw many big bashes at her old digs. Now, she and hubby Mark (of the McDonald's Cohons) throw more manageable outdoor shindigs at their family-sized new place.

Cohon has also created an out-

Jersey halter dress, \$150, Orilla Kelly, Augustina, 416-922-4248; hat, \$55, Kumari's in Toronto, 416-324-9830; coral necklace, \$56, Banana Republic, bananarepublic.com; bangle, \$4.90, H&M, www.hm.com.



Tunic, and jean, \$425 and \$375, 3.1 by Phillip Lim at Holt Renfrew, 1-866-465-8736; turquoise bracelet, \$75 at Kumari's; shoes, \$150, Dolce Vita at Augustina.

door room on her large covered back deck, a big trend according to Shawn Gibson, who styled our French bistro garden table. "Real furniture looks great right now," he says. "Here we've taken the same bistro furniture you'd find in Paris, and done it up in a market style."

That means pots of fresh rosemary, lemons rolling about. Even pea gravel, for the Jardins du Luxembourg mood.

Cohon digs the market feel too, plucking flowers straight out of her newly revamped garden (lilacs and lilies of late) and plonking them on the buffet. Bancroft, whose back-

yard is mostly vegetal, takes scissors with her on walks with baby Emmanuelle and sneaks her neighbours' rhododendrons for the table.

Beyond champers, Bancroft also believes in sparkly attire: "I'm all about the embroidered tunic."

Toronto designer Virginia Johnson (famed for the stuff she did for ultimate hostess Kate Spade) is right on the tunic trend. "Something loose is just more elegant," she says. Her tunics boast bold prints (in green, pink, red, turquoise) on white: "A hostess should definitely stand out."

In Montreal, "where we've had exactly two nice days since April," says Anna-Maria Valentine of the to-die-for shoe destination Mona Moore on Sherbrooke Street West, "the parties are still inside, at the museum. Most rich women in Montreal leave the city as soon as summer finally hits."

Valentine herself has a uniform for garden parties — signature capris, a Rick Owens T-shirt and Lanvin black ballerina flats. "Flats are the key. That way, your heels never go through the grass!"

As for music, Cohon says lounge is out. "I play R&B, it gets people in a great mood," she says. Bancroft opts for the iPod party shuffle (note: Do hide the computer, or every guest wants to be a DJ). "That means you sometimes get Biggie and Tupac with Glenn Gould, but hey, it's a party!"

Bancroft does everything else with such aplomb: There's her ritual of seeking breakfast radishes in the garden, or strapping baby on back and heading into the surf to snag Dungeness crabs. It's a good thing then that she goes the extra mile to muss things up, otherwise, we'd hate her.

