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Picking Your Outdoor Gear

A budget-minded buyer’s guide for backyard days, day hikes, and weekend camping.

BUYING GUIDE / CHECKLISTS / BUDGET PLANNER



START HERE

Shop for your first outing

Picture the next place you'll actually use your gear. That one outing tells you more about what to buy than a long list of features.

Write down the conditions

Where are you going? How many people are coming? How far will you carry everything? Look at the expected weather, available shade, water access, and whether you'll be out after dark.

Sort your gear into three groups

List what you already own, what you can borrow, and what you still need. Lay it all out together. A tent without a compatible rainfly or a cooler that won't fit the trunk is a problem you can catch before checkout.

Spend first on the gear you'll rely on

For a day hike, start with comfortable footwear and a pack that carries your essentials. For camping, put shelter and sleep comfort ahead of camp furniture. For the backyard, start with the shade or seating you'll use every week.

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BACKYARD

Set up your backyard

Build around how you spend time outside, whether that’s coffee for two, dinner with friends, or a full afternoon with the family.

Shade that fits the space

Measure the area you want shaded at the time you’ll use it. For a patio umbrella, check canopy diameter, pole diameter, and the manufacturer’s compatible base and wind instructions. An offset design leaves the tabletop clear but usually takes up more floor space.

Seats people will use

Check seat height, armrest height, and the stated weight limit. If you bring chairs in every night, folded size and carry weight matter. If they stay outside, check care instructions and whether fabric or cushions can be replaced.

Lighting that suits the job

Use softer lighting around seats and brighter light where people walk or serve food. For lights exposed to weather, check the manufacturer’s outdoor-use rating and where the cord or charging port will sit.

A cooler that fits the gathering

Compare inside dimensions with the bottles, food containers, and ice you plan to pack. A wide opening helps when several people share it. A drain plug makes cleanup easier for larger coolers.

STARTER KIT

Use the seating you already own, add shade where people sit, and borrow a cooler for the first gathering.

DAY HIKING

Carry what you need

Choose gear for your route, the conditions, and the time you'll be away from the trailhead.

Footwear you can wear for hours

Try shoes with your hiking socks. Walk uphill and downhill if you can. Your heel should feel secure and your toes should have room on descents. Compare tread, fit, and how quickly the shoe dries for the trails you use.

A pack that fits when loaded

Try your pack with the water, layers, and food you expect to carry. Look for shoulder straps that sit comfortably and pockets you can reach when you need them. Check bottle-pocket depth and whether your rain layer fits without repacking everything.

Water, layers, and a light

Plan your water around the route and conditions, including whether reliable refill points exist. Choose layers for the forecast and carry a headlamp with backup power. Try its controls before you go so you can use it in the dark.

PACK THE TEN ESSENTIALS

Include navigation, sun protection, extra clothing, light, first aid, an emergency fire-starting method, repair tools, extra food and water, and emergency shelter. Share your route and return time with someone.

Read the National Park Service Ten Essentials guide

WEEKEND CAMPING

Sleep comfortably at camp

For a drive-in campsite, packed size still matters. Check what fits your vehicle and how long it takes to set up.

A tent that fits your group

Compare the floor dimensions with your actual sleeping pads. Allow space for bags or look for a vestibule. Check peak height, door placement, included stakes, and rainfly coverage. Practice pitching it at home before your first trip.

A sleeping bag and pad that work together

Compare the bag’s comfort rating, when available, with the overnight forecast. If you tend to sleep cold, allow extra margin. For pads, compare insulation using the stated R-value, along with width, thickness, packed size, and how you’ll inflate it.

A camp kitchen built around your meals

Plan your menu before buying cookware. A simple breakfast and a one-pot dinner need fewer tools than cooking multiple dishes at once. Check campground rules, food storage requirements, and water availability before packing.

Lights that work after dark

A headlamp frees both hands while pitching a tent or sorting gear. A lantern gives the group a shared light source. Compare run time at the brightness you’ll use and pack the batteries or charging cable it requires.

STARTER KIT FOR TWO

Borrow a tent that fits two pads. Pack bags for the overnight forecast, one headlamp each, and a cooler you can lift when full.

SHOPPING

Compare listings side by side

Compare exact models and sizes. Reviews and photos on a product page can cover several versions of the same item.

01 Confirm the model and what’s included

Check the model number, size, and bundle contents. Look for any parts you’ll need to buy separately, such as an umbrella base, batteries, or a compatible pump.

02 Read the specs that affect your trip

A folding chair needs to fit in your trunk. A cooler needs enough usable space after adding ice. A tent needs floor space for the pads you already own. Write down the one or two dimensions that decide whether each option works.

03 Look for patterns in reviews

Start with recent reviews for the same model. Look for recurring reports on fit, leaking seams, weak hinges, or battery life. Give more weight to reviews that describe conditions similar to yours.

04 Compare the full cost

Add shipping and required accessories. Check the seller’s return window and how the manufacturer handles warranty claims or replacement parts. For items that need a fit check, leave time to try them while you can still return them.

BREAK A TIE

Pick the option that meets your main requirement and that you can easily set up, carry, clean, or store after the trip.

PLANNING WORKSHEET

Make a gear budget

Start with a spending cap. Reserve a portion for the small things you could miss, like spare batteries or a carry bag.

Example for a $150 starter budget

For a drive-in weekend with a borrowed tent, one possible split is $65 for sleep comfort, $30 for lighting and batteries, $30 for food and water storage, and $25 for any last-minute needs. Adjust the split around what you already own. These are planning amounts.

Outing and date

Total spending cap

Gear I already own or can borrow

Item	Feature I need	Cost limit

Add each cost limit and leave room under your spending cap for accessories and shipping.

BEFORE YOU GO

Pack and test your gear

Use this checklist when your order arrives and again the day before you head out.

- [ ] Lay out the gear by activity and check it against your plan.
- [ ] Load the pack, cooler, or vehicle with the equipment you'll actually carry.
- [ ] Try on footwear with your outdoor socks and walk around indoors.
- [ ] Set up your tent or shade gear and check the included parts.
- [ ] Charge lights and electronics, then test them and pack backup power.
- [ ] Check forecasts, daylight hours, and local rules for your destination.
- [ ] Clean, dry, and inspect your gear after the outing before storing it.

KEEP YOUR SHOPPING LIST HANDY

Take the specs, sizes, and budget from your worksheet when you browse. Visit MikesPicks.net.