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Would you put mom or dad in a 'granny pod'?

Your aging parent may prefer living in a tiny house in your backyard to a nursing home.

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So-called 'granny pods' have recently gained popularity in the United States as an alternative to nursing homes.

So-called 'granny pods' have recently gained popularity in the United States as an alternative to nursing homes. (Photo: MEDCottage)

If you have aging parents, you know how much they value independence. So much so, that some seniors fear losing independence and moving into a nursing home more than they fear death, according to one [study](#). Adult children don't like the idea of nursing homes either, with 94 percent agreeing their parents should be able to age in place.

So what's a family to do if an elder requires extra care and would do better living close by? For some families, allocating a room in the main house works well, but not all seniors want to live with their children (and not all adult children want to live with a parent.) Besides, many houses aren't designed for a person with limited mobility.

Enter the "granny pod." These tiny homes are not a new concept — they started popping up around 2005 in the United States and have recently gained popularity. Granny pods are modular, portable "accessory dwelling units" (ADU) that can be installed in a backyard so families can care for their senior but simultaneously honor the need for independence. Depending on zoning, the structures can be temporary or permanent and can be repurposed later for another use.

The concept is popular and timely. In less than 15 years, millions of baby boomers will reach age 79, the average age of a nursing home resident. By 2030, nearly one in five residents will be 65 or older, the U.S. Census Bureau projects.

Granny pod features

The tiny homes have an open floor plan with a central sitting room/bedroom, small kitchen, and bathroom.

The homes may be small, but the open floor plan makes it live larger. (Photo: MEDCottage)

Several companies have taken the lead on the granny pod concept. N2Care, a Virginia company, debuted its [granny pod design](#) in 2012. The tiny homes come in three models, offering an open floor plan with a central sitting room/bedroom, small kitchen, and bathroom. The design includes a suite of safety features, such as a wheelchair accessible bathroom sink, walk-in shower, grab bars, rubber floors, camera monitors and floor lights. The kitchen contains a medication dispenser, and sensors alert caregivers if the senior has fallen. Smart robotic features monitor vital signs, filter the air for contaminants, and communicate with off-site caregivers. Fair warning: Most states' zoning laws don't allow this granny pod design, but N2Care is working on a new module that complies.

[Better Living Express](#), another leader in the field, offers additions and stand-alone cottages in a variety of sizes with care solutions, such as grab bars and walk-in showers, built in. Seattle-based [FabCab](#) builds ADU models ranging from 300 to 1,800 square feet. The pre-cut shells and accompanying components arrive at the building site as a kit to be assembled by a licensed contractor.

These independent units don't come cheap, but when weighed against the typical cost of a year of nursing home care, around \$80,000 for a semi-private room, according to [Genworth's 2015 Cost of Care Survey](#) they might be more cost-effective in the long haul. N2Care's cottages can be leased or bought (starting at \$40,000), but amenities and installation boost the cost significantly. The other cost consideration: The possibility of paying for in-home care if and when the time comes.

Before you buy...

Before you move ahead on an ADU, make sure your city's local building codes and zoning laws allow for this structure on your property. Then check on [what permits are required](#). Also, if your current septic system handles a four-bedroom house, adding an ADU with an additional kitchen and bath may mean your septic system will need updating.

Some states are considering legislation explicitly permitting granny pods, and others, including New York and California, already have such laws in place. In Virginia, a 2010 law allows a temporary building with a physician's order. If you have long-term plans for a separate structure, you'll need to find out what your city allows and read the fine print about who qualifies for this kind of dwelling.

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