

Natural Swimming Pools

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The latest pools combine a harmonious place to swim and a wildlife haven. We explain how to create a green place to take a dip...

Not so long ago, if you wanted a swimming pool in your garden, the only option was a bright blue rectangle, treated with chemicals and likely to be covered with an ugly tarpaulin for much of the year. But in recent years an altogether more attractive option has emerged: the natural swimming pool – looking for all the world like a pond or formal water garden, but where the plants keep the water in a separate swimming area beautifully clean and clear.

“They’re a dramatic example of ecological

“Our natural pool is a fantastic feature in the garden all year round.”

design, combining the best of the natural and man-made worlds, while creating beauty,” says Michael Littlewood, a landscape architect specializing in sustainable design, who first brought the concept to the UK in 1999. “The clear but unsterilized water is totally safe for children to play in and birds to drink. Natural pools offer enjoyment not only in the warm months, but during winter too, when they can be used for ice skating and other activities.”



Natural vs traditional pools

The arguments in favour of natural pools are convincing. Fully integrated into the garden, they look good year round, are pleasant to swim in, and the absence of chemicals makes them totally safe for both people and wildlife.

“As every swimming pond is different, people see them as a private, bespoke bathing space – with very little maintenance and no health risks,” says Tim Evans, who has built more than 40 natural pools since co-founding Gartenart Swimming Ponds in 2003. “A swimming pond works on many levels – it is all at once a beautiful landscape feature, a practical swimming facility and a wildlife sanctuary. But perhaps the strongest appeal is to our desire to immerse ourselves in nature.”

Sean Moore’s natural pool in East Sussex: ‘I just want to sit out here with a cup of tea, absorb the peace, and contemplate the world.’

Sean and Rowena Moore, who worked with Gartenart to install a natural pool at their home in East Sussex, are equally enthusiastic. “The whole family loves it,” Sean says. “We all swim in it, but the girls are also fascinated by the wildlife that congregates around the planted area. As for me, I’m drawn to the space in a way I would never be with a conventional pool. I just want to sit out here with a cup of tea, absorb the peace and contemplate the world.”

How do natural pools work?

Natural swimming ponds employ a more sophisticated and effective version of the natural



cleansing process that occurs in lakes and ponds in the wider landscape. The water is cleaned and purified by a combination of plants and micro-organisms including beneficial bacteria. “The main difference is that in the man-made version the planted and swimming areas occupy separate spaces, divided by a wall that terminates 30cm to 50cm below the surface of the water, to allow free transfer of water from one zone to another,” says Michael Littlewood whose book *Natural Swimming Pools* explores their operation in depth. “The plants are the engine room of the whole system and are vital for its correct biological function. In addition they also provide habitats for wildlife both in and out of the water, as well as contributing to the visual scene throughout the year.”

In the planted zone, the plants acts as natural filters, absorbing decomposing materials, harmful bacteria such as *E.coli* and pollutants

A Gartenart pool in Oxfordshire – a striking example of the formal look

from the water and producing oxygen that supports all life. It’s what is known as a closed ecosystem, with micro-organisms helping to break down the decomposing wastes into substances the plants can use as nutrients and

“The whole family loves it.”

zooplankton feeding on single-celled algae that might otherwise collect on the surface. The adjacent swimming area is totally clear of plants and free from debris and sediment. Wildlife such as frogs, toads and newts stay mostly in the planted area, which provides them with food and shelter, and tend to have migrated away from the water by the time the swimming season begins. Additional mechanical filtering systems are often

incorporated to encourage and fine-tune and process, along with a leaf skimmer to remove the debris from the surface.

Choose the size and design

You don't need an enormous garden to have a natural swimming pool. The smallest Gartenart has installed is in a London garden measuring 7m x 4m, more of a plunge pool, with the swimming area just 3.5m by 3.5m, and surrounded on two sides by plants – while the largest is 500 square metres and makes up a section of the moat surrounding the Norfolk home of Carphone Warehouse founder, Charles Dunstone.

Design revolves around whether a more formal or naturalistic look is required. “You can choose the design depending on your own preference and style,” says Tim Evans, citing a rectangular pool they built in Oxfordshire as a striking example of the formal look, with an aqua-green liner and the water deepening in visible steps, with bands of different types of plants on either side. “This goes for the planting as well as the shape of the pool: some of the more structural reeds and grasses really lend themselves to more modern architectural schemes, while water lilies look good anywhere.”

Sean Moore's pool evolved as a fusion of styles, to satisfy both his and his wife's different requirements. “I wanted something formal and structural, while she preferred a more natural design that would blend with plants and the landscape,” he says. The finished design as two side bordered by a straight-edged stone terrace and a curved planting area (see leading photo).

Care and maintenance

Disruption during construction is inevitable, especially during the excavation process and the result can look a little bare until plant

growth really begins – usually in the pool's second summer. But the joy of a natural pool is that, once constructed, it pretty much looks after itself. “We recommend a twice-yearly maintenance schedule, which can be done either by the owners or by us,” says Tim Evans. “In the autumn all the plants should be cut back so that they don't fall into the water as they die back, and in spring we use a vacuum to remove any sediment on the swimming area floor. It shouldn't be more than half a days work each time.”



The future for pools

The solar-powered heating an option and increasing success in converting conventional pools by removing the surround and creating a planting area, natural pools seem set to be the next big thing. “Increasingly the question is ‘Why do anything else?’” says Tim Evans. Perhaps the final word should go to Sean Moore. “Our natural pool is a fantastic feature in our garden all the year round,” he says. “And we're all looking forward to seeing it evolve and change and grow – which is more than you can say for the traditional bright blue rectangle.”