

# Pond life helps natural pools survive recession ripples

FROM THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH 27<sup>th</sup> June 2009 By Jenny Hirschhorn



There is nothing quite like the impending arrival of a new baby to trigger a reality check in expectant fathers. In 1997, Tim Evans had given up working in the City in search of a more meaningful way of life. Following a visit to India, he became heavily involved with postmodern spirituality, relying on occasional management consultancy work to keep the wolf from the door. But when his wife announced that she was pregnant, he realised that a more reliable source of income was called for.

The news came soon after Mr Evans, now aged 40, had met Ralf Schmiel, a German who

*Tim Evans visiting one of Gartenart's ponds in Hertfordshire*

was a member of the same spiritual group, and who was trying to introduce the idea of natural swimming ponds into the UK. "The industry was quite mature in Germany and Austria, where there are quite a few public swimming ponds as well, but virtually unknown in this country," said Mr Evans.

Natural swimming pools are designed so that swimmers can swim in pure, clear water with no chemicals. Instead, plants are specially selected to purify the water. The added benefit is that the

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ponds make an attractive landscape feature and wildlife sanctuary.

Mr Evans had, for many years, harboured a wish to start his own business and he found Mr Schmiel's eco-friendly idea really appealing. The pair decided they would make a good team and Mr Evans bought into the business.

With the partnership sealed, Gartenart Natural Swimming Ponds opened for business in 2003. Their first break was a project they won in the Midlands. Apologising for the pun, Mr Evans said: "The client took the plunge with us, choosing a company with very little in the way of experience. We are eternally grateful for the trust he put in us and owe him a great deal."

From that point business mushroomed. Because the concept was so original and photogenic it attracted a considerable amount of press coverage, helping to show potential clients that there is an alternative to conventional swimming pools. Gartenart has now built more than 40 ponds in Europe and America, including one measuring 600 square metres for Charles Dunstone, founder of the Carphone Warehouse.

Last year, because of his wife's ill health, Mr Schmiel brought forward his long-term ambition of moving to Australia and now runs an independent branch of the business Down Under. Meanwhile, the UK business, now solely owned by Mr Evans, prospered, but the recession was just around the corner.

Swimming pools, natural or otherwise, are a luxury item (an average domestic natural pond costs between £50,000 and £80,000), so how hard has the business been hit by the current economic crisis? Mr Evans admits that, in January, he was a very worried man. "At the start of the troubles, we were still working to our order book so we were fine. At the beginning of the year, though, demand had all but stopped."

Historically, there has been considerable interest from the US and not a single inquiry came in from there in January or February.

He knew that the only thing to do was hold his nerve until the spring, and his instinct proved right. "In March and April we had a lot more interest than we normally do in those months, so I think there was a pent-up demand from people who had put the idea on hold for a while."

Currently, Gartenart's single construction team, which has remained largely unchanged since the business was founded, can only cope with one project at a time. The next big step will be to take on a second construction team, which will allow the company to handle twice the number of projects. "I will have to make the decision when the right time to do that is, but at the moment I think it will be next spring."

#### RECESSION TOOL KIT

- Don't panic
- This is a perfect opportunity to learn to delegate to others so you can focus on sales. My staff were ready for it and have grown with the responsibility
- Do remain flexible, and cut costs when necessary
- Do listen to exactly what your customers want
- Don't compete on price, compete on quality