

A Greener Splash

FROM PRIVATE BANKING Spring 2008



Imagine this. Sun glittering on a pond, an enclave of reeds and lily pads, the radiant flash of a dragonfly. It's an idyllic scene, a distant childhood memory. Except this is your back garden. This is your swimming pool.

More precisely, this is a natural swimming pool – or “swimming pond”, as they are also known – which functions as its own ecosystem. Unlike a traditional pool, which relies on chemicals such as chlorine to keep the water clean, it is all down to aquatic plants that keep

This pool in the Midlands is designed and landscaped to provide greater shelter and a more natural setting. It was built by Gartenart in 2004 and is 17m by 8m.

the water free of pollutants. It's not even a matter of working with nature. It's not magic: it's just letting nature get on with what it does.

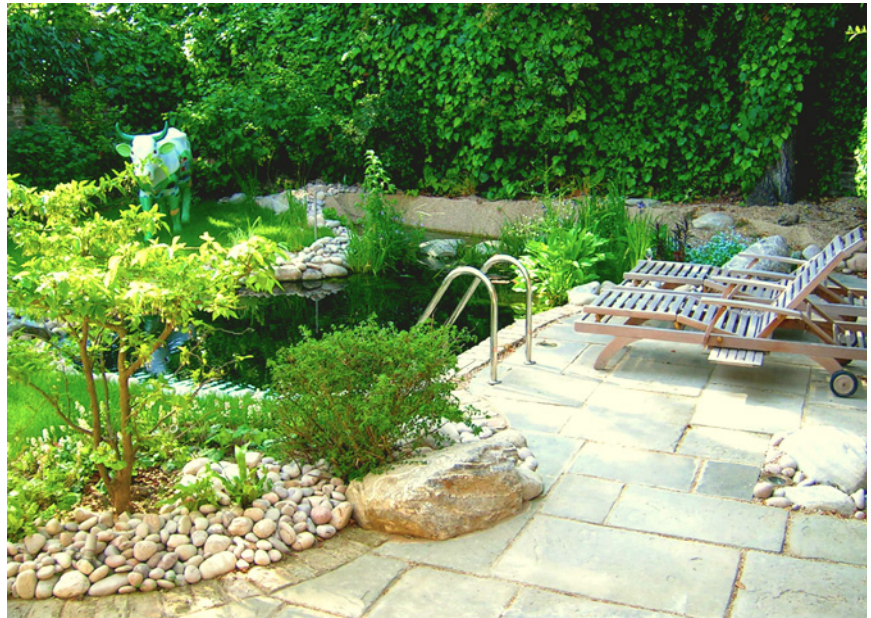
Developed as an industry in Austria in the early eighties, they took off in Germany and Switzerland as well. Tim Evans, director of Gartenart, a company that designs and builds natural swimming pools, estimates that there are now around 50,000 of them on the Continent,

both private and public. They've only recently been adopted over here, and there is an increasing number of companies offering design and construction services.

Michael Littlewood, a landscape architect who is pioneering the use of natural pools in the UK and author of *Natural Swimming Pools*, estimates that there are perhaps 100 examples in Britain. Among the early adopters of natural pools is Charles Dunstone, founder of Carphone Warehouse, whose pool was built by Gartenart.

Iris Murdoch memorably described conventional swimming pools as “machines for swimming in.” There is nothing mechanical or alienating about the experience of a natural pool. Rather, the opposite: it is a moment of tranquility. As one owner put it: “I just love the seamless transition of pond into landscape.” Another advantage of natural pools is that they are attractive all year round – come midwinter, it is a far more appealing sight than a drained or covered pool. They are also a habitat for many different types of wildlife – Littlewood stresses that animals generally stay in the “regeneration zone” and that as soon as you touch the water, any creature that happens to be in the pool with make a swift exit.

The key to the functioning of a natural pool



Urban chic: these two pools, both created by Gartenart, are fine examples of town planning. The example above, situated in St John's Wood in London, is believed to be the first “city pond” in Britain and the smallest pool in the country to boot. Below, eco-swimming pond and Giverney come to London's leafy district of Highgate.



is that there are actually two areas of water – a shallow regeneration zone containing the plants that clean the water, and a deeper pool for the actual swimming. The two parts, which have the same surface area, can be side by side – separated by a submerged wall to ensure the integrity of each zone – or kept totally apart and connected by a channel or waterfall. The only



In keeping with the rest of the garden, this green pool in Wiltshire is formal, with a rectangular cleaning zone as one end. The swimming area is 13m x 3m.

other requirements are a small pump to move the water between the areas and skimmers to remove surface debris.

The cleaning action happens in the regeneration area. Micro-organisms break down harmful bacteria in the water, while the plants extract nutrients, helping to prevent the build-up of algae. If the balance of plants and pool size is managed correctly, the result is clear and healthy water that meets European Union standards. In fact, testing at the large public pool in Lindenthal, near Leipzig, demonstrated

that the water was of drinking quality.

Though there is an obvious appeal here for the ecologically minded, you really don't have to fit any preconceived stereotypes to have one. Tim Evans says his clients vary: "They are often wealthy individuals who run their own businesses or work in the city. There are a few who have used their savings, as this was something that they really wanted."

As well as being environmentally more friendly, there may even be health benefits to these pools too, though this is a difficult area. Whatever you think about the various alarmist claims make over the years about the impact of swimming in heavily chlorinated water, it doesn't require a great leap of imagination to think that

such chemicals might not do the world of good for, say, eczema.

Annie Noble, who had a natural pool installed in her garden in Bristol by Gartenart last year, is impressed by the quality of the water. “Some of our friends wouldn’t get in because they saw it as, you know, an ordinary pond,” she says. “They were expecting it to smell and be muddy but when they finally tried it, they all said how nice and natural it felt, and your skin comes out feeling really soft, not crinkly and smelling of chemicals.” Evans concurs: “You know the difference only when you swim in natural water. It is a unique experience. Rejuvenating, even. The water is clear and has a liveliness to it. You don’t come out with your skin dry, hair stiff and eyes sore as you do from chlorinated water.”

The pools are usually sealed with liners, and the walls built from stone, brick, or, in some cases, recycled plastic. Designs can vary considerably. “Most people want something natural-looking,” says Evans, “but more formal designs are not uncommon. Shapes and sizes are flexible – the smallest pool that Gartenart have built is 30 square metres, and the largest, 600. As long as the underlying principle of the two areas is maintained, most things are possible. Current owners of a traditional pool – or a large enough pond – can ‘go green.’ This involves either adding the shallow plant area to the original pool or pond, or splitting what you have to accommodate both areas.”

The average cost of a pool depends on size, quality, complexity and each individual garden. Evans gives the figure of £45,000-plus, while Littlewood estimates the cost at £400 or £450 per square metre for a basic natural pool, which compares favourably to a conventional one. There will probably be extra landscaping costs to consider as well. Also, as Will Woodhouse from Woodhouse Natural Pools points out, swimming ponds tend to be larger than conventional pools,

making them more expensive.

However, as a natural pool maintains itself most of the time, savings are made on maintenance. A swimming pond doesn’t need a weekly dose of chemicals, nor the seasonal emptying and refilling (saving on gallons of water too). Regular cleaning to remove silt and particles also isn’t an issue. Some plant care is necessary, seasonal vacuuming may be required and, if the pool is very near trees, you may need netting for a couple of months in the autumn.

Pools can be heated, though both Littlewood and Evans don’t particularly recommend it. This is because the shallow plant zone is efficient at heating up, acting as a natural solar panel, and water circulates to the swimming area. “Natural pools are generally warmer than a traditional pool,” says Evans. Temperatures can reach 24°C-26°C in a decent summer.

What is apparent is that these aren’t your Californian “show” pools, built in limestone, dripping with 24-carat gold and coquina, and plated with hand-painted tiles to create a display of wealth or even a high-board for one’s ego. A swimming pond suggest modesty, possibly romanticism, a desire for integration rather than a domination of the natural world.

For Evans, they are a “21st-century product,” and he regards traditional pools as a more “seventies and eighties product.” He believes that the fact that they are more ecological is a starting point. More important to him are the possibilities they bring to quality of life, for example, in terms of quality of experience and aesthetics. “In Germany and Austria, apparently every second new pool now being built is a natural pool,” he declares. “I see that eventually happening here.”