

Different strokes

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Natural swimming ponds are clean, green and a world away from the tacky turquoise terrors of old. Dive in, says Katrina Burroughs

A refreshing dip in an outdoor pool, surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature, is heaven on a warm summer's day. Yet our relationship with the garden variety of swimming bath has been blighted by everything from 1980s crimes against design to recent eco-anxieties. Those Costa del Kidney pools with mosaic dolphins have a distinctly naff air and are grievously ungreen — think chemical

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cocktail in a concrete shell. Indeed, far from being a selling point, pools have a reputation as a property-market passion-killer — the best way of subtracting, rather than adding, value to your home.

Now the tide may be turning at last. “Swimming pools can be an asset,” says William Kirkland, manager of the Oxford office of John D Wood, who deals in homes priced at £800,000 and up, “but it depends on the pool and on the buyer. The garden needs to

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be big enough to accommodate it, and it's got to be discreet — not 3ft from the sitting-room window." In other words, a pretty pool, well positioned, could be a deal-maker, not a deal-breaker.

Kirkland's comment reflects the way in which pools have been reinvented over the past few years by specialist designers, landscapers and architects. Instead of novelty shapes, the latest sunken pools are simple rectangles or T-shapes, their sober straight lines made even slicker with a deck-level water line (lapping the surround, rather than sitting below it) or, if there is a view, a vanishing or infinity edge.

Finishes have also improved beyond recognition. Those garish mosaics and glossy ceramic tiles are out, replaced by stone, including slate of the quality you might

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choose for your bathroom floor, to add an understated, natural vibe. Most desirable are the textured Italian marbles from the bespoke designers Milano Pools (from £60 per sq metre; milanopools.com).

So what will it cost? Tony Kirk, director at Milano, estimates that an in-ground concrete-shell pool of 30ft x 15ft will set you back £45,000-£50,000. You will also need to factor in extras such as electric covers (£12,000-£15,000) and maintenance (£1,200-£1,500 a year). Surely there's a cheaper option? Well, according to the Swimming Pool and Allied Trades Association, an above-ground pool — little more than a timber-clad tub, really — can be yours for

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less than £1,500. A basic block-and-liner pool starts at £14,000.

If you want to go one step further and combine good taste with the greenest of green technology, then it's got to be a swimming pond, or natural pool. It's a form that's been around in Austria and Germany since the 1980s, but has only recently broken through in this country.

"The modern definition of being clean or healthy is to be sterile," says Tim Evans, who left a City job seven years ago to set up Gartenart, which specialises in natural swimming ponds. "With traditional pools, people fight against what naturally occurs, using chlorine, and kill everything in the water. In a swimming pond, we harness the natural processes in the microbiology to take care of impurities."

Each such pool has a swimming area and a planted zone; the plants' natural cleaning properties are backed up with filtration and surface-skimming systems. And that's it. The pond builds up a healthy ecosystem, in which organisms such as zooplankton consume bacteria and the phytoplankton that becomes algae.

A natural pool is not a budget option — prices for design and installation start at £50,000 — but it will look beautiful in summer and winter alike, and should become more attractive with age, as the planting matures. Maintenance costs are low to none and the small regular tasks, such as collecting weeds and clearing leaves, are easy to do.

Sacha Cole, 41, an interior designer, chose a swimming pond for her home last summer. "We live in a 15th-century tithe barn in Hertfordshire," she says. "The view is beautiful. All we can see is fields and nature all around us, and we were looking for something that would fit in. We didn't want a turquoise monstrosity."

Cole and her husband, James, 42, who works

in the City, also wanted a pool that would be a chemical-free zone for their children, Zoe, 10, and Oliver, 7. The result was a 30ft x 13ft pond, including large natural stones, rustic wooden steps and shingled margins planted with tall umbrella palms, reeds and bulrushes.

Installation took six weeks and cost about £60,000.

"It is more expensive than having a traditional pool," she says, "but you're paying for something that looks so much better. We have lovely water lilies and yellow irises, and there are newts and dragonflies. It's idyllic."