

‘Second Wave’ Natural Swimming Pools

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We dip into the new technologies giving natural swimming ponds a different emphasis



A new ‘second wave’ of natural swimming ponds is slowly but surely challenging the UK perception of naturalistic, informal, wild ponds. Even their name is changing and they are now often described as natural swimming pools in keeping with their potentially formal, contemporary style.

This evolution is being led by companies such as Gartenart based in North London,

which utilises high specification technology to reduce the percentage of space required for the planting filtration zone, leaving larger zones for swimming. Natural swimming pools are based on the premise that water is purified without artificial chemical aid, using natural techniques to help simulate nature’s low-nutrient oligotrophic lakes.

Back in 2003, Gartenart was advising clients that a minimum space of 100sqm was necessary and at least 50% of the area would be



The Wood family's natural swimming pool, converted from an existing conventional pool using second wave technology.

needed for planting and purification. But then the methods were based solely on biological processes. This has all changed. Ultra-efficient filter mediums with high absorption rates of nutrients can now be rigorously tested. So when the water volume and flow rate are known factors, scientific calculations can exactly determine the necessary balance of water to gravel bed filtration to create beautiful clear water throughout the year without being reliant on planting.

Perhaps the most significant difference for those living in cities or with smaller gardens is the dramatic reduction in required size. "Potentially, the size is without limits," explains Tim Evans, managing director of Gartenart,

"even a plunge pool is possible." Completed in summer 2009, Simon and Lesley Wood's pool in Orpington, Kent is one of the smallest of the Gartenart pools to-date, being 8.5m x 3.5m with a 6.5m swimming length. At Foxhills Spa, the new pool built in summer 2008 is slightly larger at 10m x 3m, but the proportion of the planting filtration zone is just 20% leaving an 8m x 3m swimming area. Stephen Margolis's city garden pool might be of a traditional naturalistic style, but it is just 7m x 4m with a plunging area.

Stylistically, natural swimming pools are changing as well and are no longer the preserve of rural environments. When designer Andrew Wilson of Wilson McWilliam Associates was commissioned by the Foxhills Country Club to landscape its spa garden, the desired quality was contemporary with the clean lines of strong geometry – not the usual aesthetic associated



Designer of the Foxhills spa garden, Andrew Wilson comments, “The water reflects well and the planting creates interest, softening the line of the pool edge.”

with natural swimming pools. “As the idea of a natural swimming pond developed, I was keen to retain this sense of order rather than introducing organic shapes and forms.” The technology of pools is of course as easily transferred to formal, modern designs as to naturalistic ones. Water blades or water courses can readily be combined into the pools and Gartenart is currently working on an infinity pool in Boston, MA.

Second wave pools require “little maintenance” testifies owner Simon Wood, with a skimmer constantly removing falling leaves and other debris for you. “Visitors are genuinely fascinated by how something so visually pleasing can work so well” he observes, “and the water

is beautifully clear.” Emptying the skimmer and occasionally vacuuming the pool’s base to remove sedimentation are the only tasks required, as well as the annual autumnal cutback of plants to prevent organic matter leaching nutrients back into the water. Thus the pools are particularly suitable for people away for long periods of time or who prefer to swim on a less regular basis. In terms of durability, the filtration medium will not reach saturation point for 10 to 15 years, at which point the medium is replaced.

A potential negative is the initial cost outlay. Both the Foxhills Spa and Simon Wood pools would be in the region of £60,000 including VAT for a full design and build, although Simon Wood’s was a conversion from a conventional pool at around £30,000 incl VAT. Wood was quick to point out the considerable advantages that offset the expense. If he had installed a



Using the technology of second wave pools, a naturalistic pond was achieved in the relatively small space of Stephen Margolis's private city garden.

conventional pool, he would have “big electrical and maintenance bills, chemicals to buy and the environmental damage to consider”, and he believes the pool is an asset to his property value.

Frequency of use is less dependent on weather than might be thought. At Foxhills Spa Wilson comments, “The client originally expected the pond to be used in the summer but members have been using it very enthusiastically throughout the year in tandem with the sauna and hot tub.”

Gartenart can offer an independent design service, and are also happy to work alongside designers, stipulating few limiting criteria in terms of size, shape, style or location. When choosing a suitable site, designers need to consider the normal rules for locating water features. Some shade is advisable although not essential, preferably for a quarter to a third of

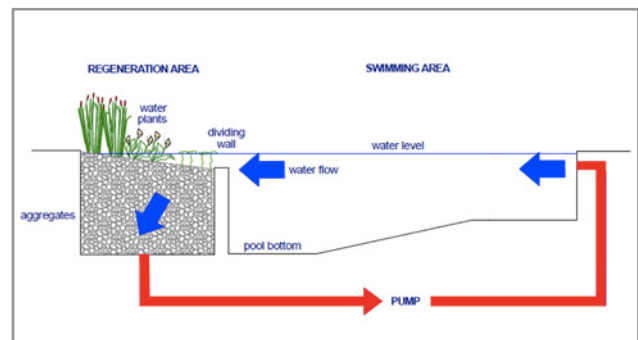
the day. Overhead trees are not ideal, although autumnal netting can overcome the problem.

Whilst issues arising from a high ground water table can be resolved at a cost, flood zones are off-limits as regular flooding disturbs the water balance and can damage plants.

There is a final dimension to the benefits of natural swimming pools which is less tangible or easy to explain, but which Evans believes designers should not overlook. “Natural water has an integrative quality that connects spaces together in an almost

spiritual way – a quality that is unmistakable when you are in its presence and that cannot be achieved through artificially, chemically purified water”. Margolis realises that “people who have sat by my pond talk about a calming experience”, whilst the managing director of Foxhills, Marc Hayton, describes “the peace of the water”.

With so much potential for natural swimming pools in smaller, modern gardens Margolis asks, “If you are putting water in a garden – whatever the size – why would you not do this?”



The mechanics of a second wave natural swimming pool.