



A natural swimming pond is home to wildlife, makes a stunning garden feature and is an attractive swimming pool.

SUPPLIED



Swim on the natural side

WITH THEIR wildlife value and calm beauty there's no denying that a pond can kick-start a dull garden. But what about dipping your toe in? Muddy, dark and sometimes pongy — there's often that lurking fear of the unknown, as I rediscovered when I swam recently in a friend's lake — with nagging thoughts about pollution, poisonous algae or, even worse, rats — hard to push out of my mind. Yet to be immersed in a world of water boatmen sculling the surface and darting dragonflies — to be surrounded with nothing but reeds and sky — a wild swim is exhilarating.

Us Kiwis like to think ourselves in touch with the natural world — we're happy to plunge into the sea with fish and seaweed, but to wallow in a hole dug at the end of the backyard?

In a Motueka backyard, a hole is exactly what Hans Brutscher and Alex Traut started with. After a year of hard slog (family illnesses and difficult access slowing play) they have ended up with a showpiece of cutting-edge design — a hybrid between a swimming pool and a space-age pond.

Their swimming pond harnesses nature's efficient systems of purifying water, combined with some of the niftiest eco-technology. Gone is the mud and gloom. The water is crystal-



Neil Ross

clear, chemical-free and glows aquamarine to complement the coast at the nearby Abel Tasman National Park, thanks to a clever olive-coloured liner which Alex uses on most of his projects.

What really impresses is the way that the clean edges melt away and plant life paddles right down into the water — a submerged wall finally separating it from the much deeper swimming zone, which is kept spotless by a robotic vacuum spidering about the floor and walls. It's these shallow planted "zones" of special sand substrate which give the pool its beautifully natural look, while doing the hard work of keeping the water clear. A pump hidden under slick decking sucks the pool water down through the plant roots, which filter out bacteria, nutrients and grime while an efficient sieve skimmer catches any floating debris.

Originally from Germany, Hans, a doctor who previously specialised in hydrotherapy and spa treatments, and

Alex, a landscape architect, bumped into each other by chance and realised they shared an enthusiasm for this innovative type of garden feature — often called a swimming pond.

They set up their natural pool business a couple of years ago — borrowing the technology from a parent company in Europe. "We took things slowly at first, picking up clients here and there. But with our more equitable climate ... New Zealand is going to be the perfect place for this sort of system," says Alex.

One of the biggest challenges is tailoring the planting of the filter beds to local ecosystems as many exotic aquatic plants can become noxious weeds. The bulk of the marginal plants are reed-like, such as the native club rush (*Schoenoplectus validus*). But blue pickerel weed (*Potamogeton amplifolius*) add useful summer colour. A benefit of the sandy shallows is that swimming ponds warm up much faster than conventional pools. You can have artificial heating if you want to swim all year but pool covers defeat the object of such a feature, which is created for its looks and wildlife benefits as much as its recreational value. Plants like water iris and waterlilies are always popular for their good looks, but their nutrient requirements mean they have to be

Take the plunge

■ A swimming pond, like any pool, is subject to the usual planning and safety restrictions. Alex likes to push regulation fencing well back so it's well concealed by his planting designs.

■ If your mains water is high in phosphates it will need additional filtration for filling and topping up a natural pool.

■ It may be natural but the price is very much 21st century. Because each design is bespoke and has to

include plant filtration zones the same size as the swimming area, the cost is above that for a normal pool. Prices start around \$70,000 and, with associated landscaping, fencing and decking, the bill can be more than double that.

■ Running costs are generally a little cheaper, with more efficient pumping systems than a regular pool and no expensive chemicals to buy.

■ Contact Alex and Hans at www.naturalpoolsnz.com/

grown either in pots or in a separate area of special clay which won't leach nutrients into the water. The natural look, however, doesn't come easy — not if you want the sort of groomed naturalness most New Zealanders seem to prefer.

To keep green algae away, an ingenious second pump is hidden at the pool edge.

This sucks air out of the ground, which is naturally high in carbon dioxide due to respiring plant roots and soil organisms and bubbles it back into the water through a carbonator. It's this CO₂ which effectively lowers the pH of the pool water to levels which discourage algae. The pumps are powerful enough to support a running water fea-

ture such as a fountain or waterfall but, for his show pool, Hans has opted for a small stream bubbling in through the reeds. The water movement coupled with the splashing of swimmers prevents mosquitoes breeding in the chemical-free waters.

Hans has been delighted how, after just a few months, the birds and insects have boomed in the garden. Children love the added dimension of pond skaters and dragonflies out on the hunt.

"The pond is a destination now — even if you don't want to swim — it constantly changes," he says. Though when the frogs arrive it may cause a stir for swimmers who like nature to be kept just a little more at arms length.