



Good to grow

BY XANTHE WHITE

Take the plunge

With a swimming pond, you can enjoy a chemical-free dip and an integrated water feature that is an ideal home for plants that love having wet feet.

The idea of plunging into a pool of crisp chemical-free water surrounded by a croaking chorus of evening frog song then surfacing to dancing dragonflies shimmering above is my idea of heaven. I'd never really fancied owning a swimming pool until I came across beautifully designed natural ones. Although a relatively new concept in New Zealand, particularly at the designer end of the market, they are an increasingly popular choice in Europe and the US, where clients with high expectations of aesthetics are demanding choices that meet high environmental standards.

As the methodology catches up with clients' demands for clarity of water and versatility of style, natural swimming pools are a realistic alternative to their chlorinated cousins. After all, why cleanse our insides with home-grown organic goodness only to spend our weekends soaking in chemicals?

How close these swimming holes come to nature depends on the desired effect and the construction method. For people who just want a natural alternative to

chlorinated pools but expect most of the bells and whistles of a normal pool, it is the ideal choice as they are constructed in a similar way to a traditional pool and for a similar cost.

Existing pools can even be converted to this natural method of filtration without too much bother. There is no restriction on the shape or form. Basically, anything that can be done with a normal pool can be done with a natural pool, but you have the advantage of being able to integrate the vegetative areas or marsh into the swimming pool.

To assist the filtration the colour of a natural swimming pool is best kept darker than a traditional pool. If sky-blue is the effect you're after, you'll need to stick to chlorine. Heating and pool covers are also not an option, although the darker colour retains heat and helps keep the water warm.

A winter skinny dip might be out of the question for the cold-sensitive but most of the year the temperature hovers between fair and idyllic. Rumour has it that those with natural pools find them much nicer to swim in and so integrated into the landscape that they are irresistible even in the colder months – although a warm shower for some defrosting afterwards is recommended.

For those willing to take the full plunge and invite the odd wandering piece of wildlife in for the swim with you, a swimming pond is the

cheaper and earthier option. Instead of being a purpose-built pool, a swimming pond is exactly that – a pond with a dedicated area of filtered water perfectly suitable for swimming.

After adequate research and respect for local regulations concerning pools, those who can call on the services of a skilled handyman with some digger skills can create a swimming pond using a plastic liner. A simple deck or jetty from which to dive and a stepladder to climb out means you need not fuss with stairs or shallow swimming areas that involve more work.

The principle for both is the same. Instead of purifying the water with chemicals, it is pumped into what is effectively a marsh, where marginal water plants process the nitrates and phosphates that would otherwise turn the water stagnant and unhealthy. This area is usually filled with a fine gravel and should be at least

80cm deep and ideally able to contain around 20-25% of the pond's volume. Where ground area is at a premium, this volume can be achieved by increasing the depth of marsh area by up to 1.5m, which is the maximum depth that will still achieve effective oxygenation. A pebble finish around the planting looks

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smart and will keep the surface easy to maintain.

Nothing beats a plant's ability to transform potential toxins into tissue. This concept has been embraced by forward-thinking municipal authorities in dealing with storm water and sewage and other areas where water pollution is an ever-present issue, and there is no reason we

shouldn't use the same principles to allow a little guilt-free luxury in our own backyards. A swimming pond also provides a wonderful opportunity to grow a range of wet-loving plants that otherwise might be impossible to grow in our gardens.

As a rule, any marginal, semi-marginal or water plant will do an effective job of filtering water. If you desire optimum filtration, particularly if space is limited, leave a smaller area for marsh, as the most effective plants for filtration are those that grow the fastest. This makes sense because the more plant tissue the plants produce, the more nitrate and phosphate they need for fuel. This makes rushes and reeds ideal, but if you fancy flowers there's still room for attractive irises and primulas around the edges. Prolifically flowering yellow irises are particularly effective.

Whether the marsh is right next to the pool or pond or a short distance away,

it will be equally effective and provide plenty of opportunity for integration as an attractive feature to suit the layout of the property.

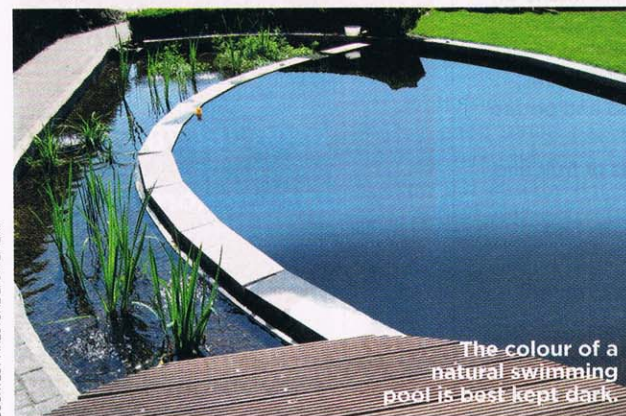
Although there will always be a place for spectacular tiled pools with horizon edges tipping into our glorious oceans beyond, this greener option offers numerous benefits. A natural pool needs cleaning only a couple of times a year, and for those who are sensitive to chemicals, the freshwater option makes swimming regularly a more appealing option.

They also encourage designers to work with plants naturally associated with water, which results in a pleasing effect and is an alternative to resort-style plantings. So, if it's something different and decidedly eco-cool that you're after, a bio pool has got to be the next hot thing for those wanting to look good while staying on side with Mother Nature. ■

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