

JUST ADD WATER

Combining the joys of wild swimming with the eco benefits of a wildlife-friendly garden, it's little wonder that the natural swimming pool has captured the British imagination

Words CAT OLLEY



A pool in the Austrian mountains by Biotop, which has one area for swimming and another for plants



Gartenart converted a huge pond into a natural swimming pool on this farm in Bedfordshire

Imagine the scene: you're slowly making your way through still water on a sunny afternoon, greenery on all sides, while dragonflies hover overhead. This is the picture painted by a growing class of converts to the swimming pond. That traditional square of brilliant blue water may be an enduring status symbol, but those in the know are seeking natural highs.

'One client described it as swimming through a Monet painting,' says Paul Mercer, who founded the Norfolk-based Swimming Pond Company in 2006 in the hope of recreating the magic of swimming in rock pools in Australia and South Africa. 'At that point nobody had heard of swimming ponds, so we had our work cut out for us.' Sixteen years later and it's a very different story – one that speaks to a convergence of movements. There's the sensational rise of wild swimming, of course, which has seen Brits flock to remote bodies of water with little care for temperature or trespassing fines. Much has been made of the health benefits. Then there's the idea of connecting to nature, and the urgent need to ensure our gardens are hospitable to wildlife by championing native plants and loosening our collective grip on our lawns.

A bathing pond offers a gentler experience than either a dip in a conventional pool or a bracing wild swimming session. While the former relies on chlorine and salt for cleaning, these pools let nature do the work by harnessing the biological processes of plants. They're well established in central Europe, but Mercer points to March 2020 as a catalyst for the UK, as people took stock of their homes and looked to new ways to boost wellbeing. 'The surge in interest was just phenomenal,' he says.

To hear Mercer speak of his own pool is a balm. 'It's so relaxing to sit next to it in the evening and watch the birds come in to bathe. There's this constant movement, which is just lovely. And that's the point – swimming ponds are life supporting.' He could just as easily be talking about his clients. ▶

PICTURES: LORENZ MASSEK, PAUL OTT

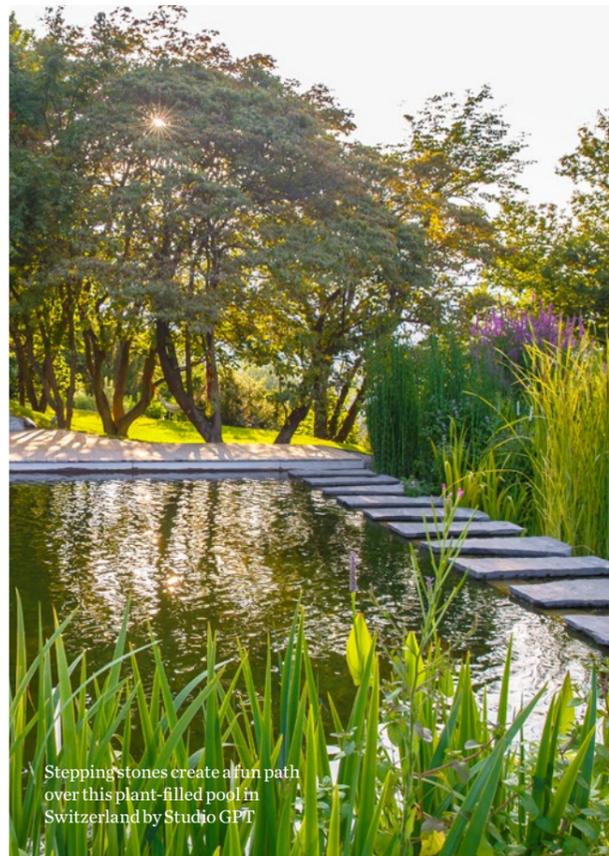


The pond at this new home in Austria by WILLL Architektur can be accessed directly from the terrace



Gartenart has created a natural pond that connects to the contemporary new-build by architecture firm Butz + King, and the sea beyond

Decking areas provide spots for sunbathing in this project by Woodhouse Natural Pools



Stepping stones create a fun path over this plant-filled pool in Switzerland by Studio GPT

PLANNING YOUR NATURAL POOL

Paul Mercer, founder of The Swimming Pond Company, on everything you need to know

What kind of site is best-suited to a swimming pond? The first thing is good access, as you'll need to get an excavator in to dig the hole. Ideally, you'd position the pool as close to the house as you can, as swimming ponds are such a thing of beauty and can be enjoyed from inside the home even in the depths of the winter months. Think about a spot that's away from mature trees, as you don't want lots of leaf debris falling in.

Is there anything else to consider at the planning stage? If you live in a listed building or within a conservation area or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), then you'll need planning permission. This is something that we handle for our clients. The planners love what we do and we've never been turned down.

What choices are involved? First, you'll need to think about size. We tend to discuss the length our clients want to be able to swim, and then work backwards. Depth is important, too, and our pools can go right down to 2.4 metres if you'd like to be able to dive in. We also need to consider how the water is accessed – you might opt for ladder steps, which we make ourselves in oak, or stone steps leading down into the water.

How is the pool natural? Also referred to as the biological filter or planted area, the pool's regeneration zone is the key to creating an ecological balance. It's at least one metre deep and made up of gravels and filtration materials, which are then planted with a range of aquatic plants. Water is circulated 24 hours a day, with the aim to turn over the whole of the pond's volume. The bacteria that builds up within the zone breaks down any waste matter that is pulled in through the filter, which means that clean and clear water can be pumped back into the base of the pool. ▶

PICTURES: WILLICENT HARVEY, ROSANNA CASTRINI, MARIANNE MAERUS





Aquatic plants provide natural filtration for this pool in Bergamo, Italy, by Studio GPT

What does it mean for a pool to be ecologically balanced? In order to achieve crystal-clear and clean water, we need to balance the level of nutrients. It needs to be high enough to feed our plants, but not too high that it encourages blanket weed to grow. The key is getting the balance right in order to create the perfect habitat for a wide array of wildlife.

When will it be warm enough to use? Temperatures from the end of May to mid-September average around 21 degrees, and we can easily see 25 degrees during a spell of hot weather. The planted area is only 10 to 20 centimetres deep, so the water warms up really quickly. It's like a rock pool on a sunny beach in that it's shallow, so much warmer than the rest of the sea. We draw that heat down and pump it back into the base of the swimming zone, so it will always be warmer than an unheated conventional swimming pool. It's very different to swimming in a river or lake! theswimmingpondcompany.co.uk

3 OF THE BEST PLANTS FOR SWIMMING PONDS

PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE *LYTHRUM SALICARIA*

'I always use purple loosestrife because it looks amazing in mid-summer with its tall blooms, which flower over a long period. It's an essential plant.'

YELLOW FLAG IRIS *IRIS PSEUDACORUS*

'For early colour, this is simply a must for any pond in the UK. Its vibrant yellow flowers look fantastic when it emerges in late spring.'

WATER LILY *NYMPHAEA 'GLADSTONIANA'*

'This variety of lily has wonderfully showy, large cup-shaped blooms. There's something tranquil about water and white flowers. I use this in most of our projects.'



Richmond Bell Architects worked with Water Artisans for this swimming pool in Wiltshire

PICTURES: CLIVE NICHOLS/GAP PHOTOS, RICHARD BLOOM



The Suffolk landscape is an integral part of the design of this pool by The Swimming Pond Company