



LANDSCAPE

Hold the Chlorine

Thanks to an innovative group of Europeans, putting in a backyard pool no longer has to mean compromising your environmental values. The Austrian-based firm Biotops is popularizing the concept of natural swimming pools or swimming ponds. A creative blend of water garden and chemical-free swimming, the pools rely solely on aquatic plants and a discrete filter system for cleaning, which completely eliminates the need to use chemicals.

Since the mid-1980s, Biotops has built nearly 1,000 natural pools in Austria and Switzerland, and now the trend is spreading across Europe. British landscape designer and Biotops consultant Michael Littlewood has arranged for the first natural pool to be built in England this year and has plans underway to bring the concept to southern France and Spain.

Biotops' natural pool has won awards in Europe for its eco-minded design, which maintains safe, algae-free water that meets strict European Union legal standards for water quality. A natural pool requires about twice the space of a traditional chlorinated pool, but costs less to install—roughly \$150 per square yard to build. The swimming area makes up half the pool, while the rest is used as a regeneration zone. The latter features a specific mix of aquatic plants and Biotops' patented Catalyzer system that cleans the water. By keeping the local ecosystem chemical-free and healthy, the pools rarely attract mosquitoes, which are kept at bay by natural predators such as frogs.

Because half of a natural pool's space is devoted to aquatic plants, it's as much a garden as a pool and can be admired year round without the need to be covered at the end of summer. According to Biotops' Tony Schneeweiss, a natural pool is also less expensive to maintain than chemically treated pools and only requires the water to be changed every five years.

Home-owners and government agencies alike are embracing the trend of chemical-free swimming pools. "Communities are starting to redesign their old pools from the 1950s," Schneeweiss says. They often choose natural pools because of the lower cost, but also because "we found out that these natural pools are the meeting places of the young people," making them an attractive point of interest for nearly any type of community.

Public pools, Schneeweiss says, offer designers unique creative freedom. Biotops, for example, recently built a community pool in the mountains near the Swiss border. To work with the natural landscape, the firm built two pools—one at a higher elevation and one lower—connected by a river that swimmers raft down with air mattresses.

Will the United States see "green" pools in its future? While Biotops has no solid plans to build pools in the States, it's hoping to attract North American landscape designers or gardening companies that want training as contractors. For more information on natural pools, contact Michael Littlewood at Michael@ecodesign.freeserve.co.uk.