

WATER WORKS

Pools and ponds sparkle in serene garden settings

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Swimming pools, ponds, water gardens and fountains bring something intrinsic to the human psyche. Just looking at water seems to soothe the weary soul and spark within one a kinship with nature. For centuries, landscapers have been aware of this phenomena and have responded to it by creating gardens with water features.

"I think there are a lot of different reasons for adding water to a garden," says landscape architect Carol Macht. "On the practical level, water brings color, light, movement and sound to a garden. But on the next higher level, water is the basis for life and we respond to it whether it's in a lovely, large swimming pool or half a barrel filled with a few goldfish and waterlilies."

Following are several examples of the ways water can be integrated into landscapes both large and small.

Waterfall/pond: Robert Nelson Farmer, Gristmill Landscaping, landscape design

"Sitting down near a water garden makes you feel the same way as sitting down in front of a roaring fire in a fireplace," says landscape designer Robert Nelson Farmer. "You get this very peaceful, tranquil, calm feeling."

A proponent of a naturalistic approach to water garden design, Mr. Farmer used 11 tons of fieldstone to create a waterfall-pond for a client in Bel Air. He even included a 1-ton "sitting" stone so visitors can sit and enjoy the view and the sound of the water.

In carving out this niche in a back yard studded with mature trees, he personally dry-stacked the stone and provided 13 outlets for water to drop 5 feet into an 8-by-10-foot pond. This movement of water provides a symphony of sounds easily heard on the nearby deck.

To make the pond as maintenance free as possible, the owners opted not to have fish or exotic plants, but the water naturally draws animals and birds, including frogs who have established what Mr. Farmer calls "squatters rights."

To help make the waterfall and pond blend in with their woodsy surroundings, Mr. Farmer did include some plants in his design. Among them are autumn ferns, mosses, lichens and carex -- a variegated Japanese grass. "Building this pond and waterfall was like creating a tapestry of nature," he says.

Swimming pool: Carol Macht, American Society for Landscape Architects, Anshen & Allen, landscape design; Pleasure Pools, pool construction

"When my client and I started talking about her pool I knew she would be using it not only for recreation, lap swimming and entertaining, but also as a place to sit and just enjoy the outside," says Carol Macht.

The trick was to add the pool to a suburban lot without losing too much lawn space, and creating visual excitement in a flat yard that went into a 7-foot slope. Ms. Macht's solution was to build a serpentine fieldstone wall against the base of the hill to give a focus to the back yard in both summer and winter. She then planted a perennial garden on the slope, using flowers such as sage, black-eyed Susans and Japanese anemones -- plants that would span the swimming season.

To enhance the curvilinear lines of the wall, Ms. Macht wrapped the far side of the pool against the fieldstone. The house side runs a straight 43 feet from end to end and provides a place for laps.

To give the water a rich blue color rather than the standard aqua often associated with swimming pools, Pleasure Pools mixed black with plaster to create a gray marbelite finish. Bluestone coping surrounds three sides of the pool and creates a terrace for lounge furniture at one end.

The appeal of the pool and surrounding landscape is well appreciated by Ms. Macht's client, who often invites guests for a swim. "I really think swimming pools take you away from real life for a while," says Ms. Macht. "They really do give their owners a little bit of a vacation."

Ponds: Christy and William Krebs, owners

"We actually bought this property because of the ponds and the natural way the grounds were landscaped," says Christy Krebs. "We love the ponds. Looking at them is much nicer than looking at land."

The Krebses also like to listen to the water. There are two ponds on the property and a fountain sits in the middle of the upper one, which is closest to the house. "You hear the fountain before you see it," Mrs. Krebs says. "Sometimes it is very soothing, but sometimes it sounds like Niagara Falls."

Both ponds are man-made, receiving water from the many natural springs on the property. The lower pond is about an acre in size and sits near the road in one of Baltimore County's rural valleys. It is more than 50 years old and a natural magnet for deer and other wildlife. With its pier, the pond is also a favorite retreat of the Krebses' children, who fish and sometimes swim there.

The upper pond -- officially called a retention or detention pond -- was created in the 1980s to help control water runoff. It is connected to the lower pond by way of a creek. Originally landscaped by Kurt Bluemel Inc., the pond is edged with clumps of various grasses and plants suitable for a watery environment. It is also home to mallard ducks and a pair of Canada geese.

Swimming pool: Kurt Bluemel Inc., landscape design; Custom Pools by McDade, pool construction

"Designing a 16-by-42-foot swimming pool to sit on a small lot with a very steep terrain was not easy," says Kent Cooper, project manager for Kurt Bluemel Inc. "We literally had to shoehorn it into the property." Luckily, adjoining properties were lovely. "We were able to steal a view," Mr. Cooper adds. "On one side was a beautiful rolling lawn and on the other side was a thick bamboo forest and large, old trees that had been planted in the 1920s or '30s."

In addition to its use as a swimming pool and area for relaxing, the pool also serves as a reflecting pond, showing on its shimmery surface glimpses of surrounding flowers. A stone retaining wall edges one side of the pool and helps support a flower bed filled with black-eyed Susans, salvia, coneflowers and assorted other perennials reminiscent of a classic English flower garden.

On the far side of the pool is a second, larger bed containing all sorts of colorful plants, such as yarrow, giant allium, ornamental grasses, hibiscus and butterfly bushes. A bluestone patio helps anchor the pool to the site.

"One of the things I really like about this pool is that it blends right into its environment," says Mr. Cooper. "It becomes another piece of nature."

It also highlights one of water's most endearing traits -- its fluidity. "I think one of the most interesting things about water is that it is always changing," Mr. Cooper adds. "How it looks depends on the time of day, the sky, the weather, the foliage on nearby trees, and lots of other natural elements."

City water garden: Eric Friedman, Friedman Associates, landscape design

"What I really like about water is that when you add it to a landscape design, it really seems to bring the garden to life because it adds the elements of movement and sound," says landscape designer Eric Friedman. "Whether it's trickling over a few stones or rushing as a raging torrent over a garden waterfall, it brings a sense of vitality to the surroundings. At the same time, water is soothing and encourages a sense of tranquillity."

When he got the job of landscaping the bricked-in back yard of a Bolton Hill townhouse, Mr. Friedman knew he would include a water element in the design. "My clients actually

didn't give me a specific program, but they told me they wanted something very serene and tranquil," he recalls. A water garden was a natural.

Opting for more than one water feature, Mr. Friedman designed three interconnecting brick pools that hug a section of the garden wall. Each pool spills over to the next, starting at the small pool at the top. That pool sends a splash of water by way of a waterfall to the circular middle pool. Here the water is directed to a spillway, where it flows into the lower pool. Bluestone coping around the middle and lower pools provides seating for family members and guests who come down from the house to enjoy the goldfish and plant life in the pools.

"Living in the city, you really can't have lots of flowers or a large garden, but I really wanted Eric to capture a sense of nature," says the wife. "And water gives you a quick connection to nature. When we are on the patio, we can close our eyes and hear the water bubbling and cascading. The sound makes you feel so serene."

Pool: Neville and Lois Jacobs, owners; Lois Jacobs, landscape designer; Maryland Pools, pool construction

"When we moved here from Buffalo, N.Y., and bought our house, I knew I would one day make the back yard -- then pretty much nothing but flat lawn -- into a special garden, and I knew my garden would have a water feature," says Lois Jacobs, an aspiring landscape architect.

"I have always been intrigued by water because it connects to the earth and because it gives you a sense of serenity. The Japanese discovered this years and years ago. Whether big or small, Japanese gardens almost always have a water feature or raked sand and rocks to represent the movement of water."

A few years ago, when the Jacobses refinanced their house, Mrs. Jacobs decided it was time for her to do the garden and add a pool. After searching a bit for just the right pool company, she found Maryland Pools. The firm was willing, she says, to "take a chance" and let her design the pool, which it then built. The decision proved the risk was worth taking when the Jacobses' pool won second place in the Master Pool Guild Contest.

Mrs. Jacobs, who will graduate this spring from the University of Maryland with a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture, knew exactly what she wanted in a pool and landscaping and she designed it all: a free-form pool; a 5-foot waterfall made mainly of dry-stacked rocks; an underground vault in which to store pool equipment; an adjoining raised pond full of goldfish and waterlilies; and a privacy bermlike hill planted with all types of evergreens, perennials, ornamental grasses and herbs.