

GARDENS

New Swimming-Pool Designs Dip Into the Natural Look

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BLUE RECTANGLES are out. Rocks, black floors and waterfalls are in.

These days, it isn't enough to install an artificial current in your swimming pool to improve your workout. As more people create outdoor living rooms that look on gardens as an extension of their home, the aesthetic focus is on the pool, often the garden's biggest feature.

By force of sheer numbers, as well as design sense, the French are the trendsetters: France is by far Europe's biggest market for pools, with Spain running a distant second.

"Here in the south of France, people live by the pool. People even put a summer kitchen, a sofa next to the pool," says Yves Zoccola, a pool architect near Aix-en-Provence. "They come home for lunch, take a dip, then they go back to work."

With installations increasing even in colder climes, improved shelters and covers can help you enjoy a swim even when the weather isn't so fine; when you aren't using the pool, they'll convert the surface to extra deck space. In Belgium, defying the rainy climate, Nathalie Maladry and Jean Charles centered their home near Namur on the outdoors. The open-plan living room and kitchen give onto a big glass veranda that overlooks the pool. The pool is covered with a low shelter; "it makes it much easier to heat and it's safer with the children around," says Ms. Maladry.

Green, beige and black pools are growing more popular as landscaping takes a turn away from the brilliant blues of pools past to more-realistic artificial rocks and water features. "The goal is to make a corner of vacation in your own garden," Mr. Zoccola says. "You can disconnect from the materialistic world, the computerized world and return to nature."

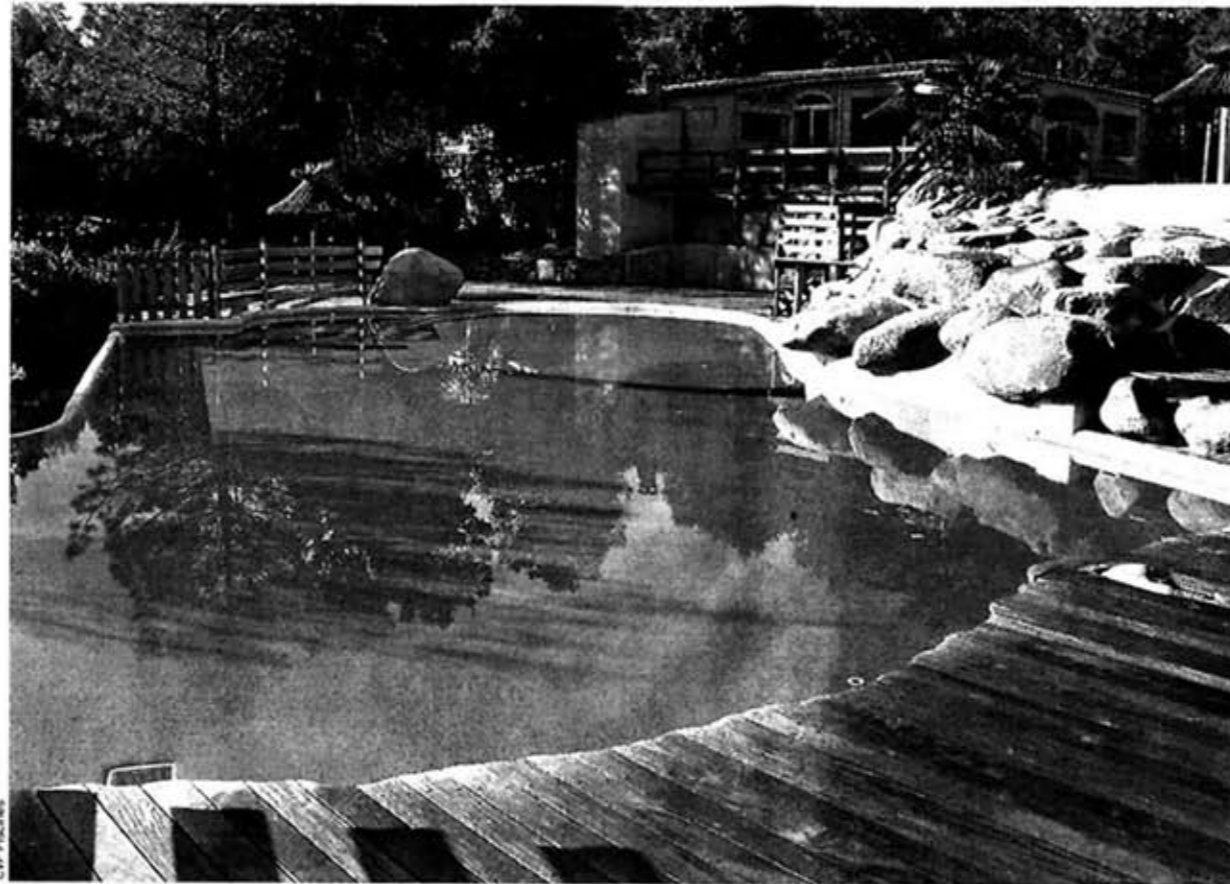
Here's a look at some pool-design trends and improved technologies that combine practical benefits with aesthetics.

Shelter and Security

A new law in France requires alarms, fencing or covers for all private swimming pools to prevent children from sneaking in and drowning.

Among the more-ingenuous solutions is a movable floor exactly the size of the pool; using a hydraulic lift, it descends to the pool floor during use and rises in one minute to just above water level when the pool is closed. The resulting deck supports 100 kilograms per square meter. While the technology has been available in Europe for about seven years, it remains rare.

"We have a pool without the inconvenience of losing the space," says Claire Colrier, whose pool occupies an inner



This two-level pool in Corsica used large boulders found on the site and a beach entry to create a natural setting.

courtyard of her house near Paris. Originally looking for a way to keep her children safe, she found other advantages to the system. "We set the plank at a shallow level when the children are playing," she says. The cover keeps the water clean and warm while looking good: "You don't want to look out your window at a tarp in the winter."

The movable floor's mechanism locks with a key for safety, to keep children from accessing it. The floors are easy to operate: Once they're unlocked, you push a button and the floor rises or descends. A small space around the edges allows water to flow over the edges without splashing.

Movable floors are available in wood, tile or stone—10-millimeter granite or slate. A floor for a six-meter-by-three-meter pool costs about €19,000 before taxes, including installation. It can be added to an existing pool, and it works in all kinds of pools except prefabricated plastic pools. Pools with sloping floors require several lifts and longer installation time.

Greenhouse-like glass shelters provide security—and can add up to two seasons of use to an outdoor pool. When closed, the shelters absorb the sun's heat and let you swim early in spring or early

on chilly mornings, while keeping out leaves, children and the neighbor's cat. The shelters can hug the edge of the pool or cover the whole deck area, with space for a table and chairs and exotic plants. The glass partitions allow you to open the pool partly or completely to the air. You can keep the cover on while you swim, or fold it back and swim in the open air.

The shelters range in height from one meter to the size of a regular room. Tall shelters can double as a greenhouse; lower shelters are more discreet, less expensive, and quicker to warm up if you want to heat the pool and shelter for use in winter.

Prices depend on the size, starting around €10,000 for a small, low-rise model of shelter and rising to as much as €83,000. Shipping costs vary widely according to size.

The Natural Look

Designers are using more natural colors to line pools, and adding boulders, "beach entries" and water features to integrate them into the garden landscape.

Small waterfalls pouring from a pile of rocks are popular as a way to hide alarms or other pool equipment, says Ber-

15 centimeters of water.

To cover the pool's walls and floor, you can pour another hard substance, such as Pebbletec, over the reinforced concrete, or top it with tiles. Pebbletec, which looks like rough sand but is solid, contains bits of quartz, which sparkle in the water; the surface is easy on bare feet without being slippery.

Natural colors and textures are becoming increasingly popular. "We're seeing more gray, green and beige for sandy beach colors," says Imogen Barneaud, managing director of CVP Piscines in La Destrousse, France. A beige bottom makes the water look pale green. "It's more natural than Caribbean blue. Very dark pools also are becoming popular," adds Ms. Barneaud.

"Black tile makes the pool like a mirror, reflecting the garden around it. The water looks dark green," says Jamie Smith, director of London Swimming Pool Co.

Fountains and waterfalls add visual interest even when the skies are gray and you're looking at your pool from inside. They're usually added after the pool is complete. Fountains, which can be had for €200 and up, are simpler and less expensive than waterfalls, which start at about €1,000.

Mr. Zoccola, the architect, has designed a number of multilevel pools with waterfalls in which the water spills from one basin down to the next. In the right setting, spillovers can create an optical illusion of a pool with no wall, or an "infinity" edge. At a pool in the south of France, overlooking the Mediterranean, Mr. Zoccola replaced the wall nearest the sea to create an overflow. The water spills over the new wall into a hidden channel, giving the impression that the pool extends out into the sea.

Stéphane Bouix, manager for development and communications at Acheter-piscine.com, a French pool-industry group, notes that a fountain or waterfall should have a separate pump—and a way to shut it off. While the sound of water should be relaxing, after a while it can be just the opposite.

Pools of the Future

This is so new, it doesn't exist yet—a pool with walls, floor and even steps made of mirrored glass. French designer Patrick Mazure is teaming with glass maker Saint-Gobain SA to build a prototype glass pool by the end of this year. Panels 50 millimeters thick will be mounted on a metal frame. The specially strengthened opaque glass can be custom-colored, and optical fibers in the glass will light it from inside, creating a glow. Fiber optics also can be used to create designs in the pool floor. A five-by-10-meter pool will cost about €150,000, says Mr. Mazure, who also designs traditional pools.

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DESIGNERS:**Yves Zoccola**

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