

LANDSCAPE LINES

Hugo Bugg reflects on gardening and design, and the changing seasons



Earlier this month I visited a garden in East Devon to meet a new client. They had a clear sense of what they wanted: water. Not as a focal point exactly, but as a presence; something that would bring character to the garden and support wildlife. And, if possible, something the family could swim in. As they talked me through the site, I thought how familiar that conversation has become. Natural swimming pools and ponds are appearing on more and more briefs, and the questions around them have shifted from cautious curiosity to genuine intent. For many, the question is no longer whether to have water, but what form it should take.

Part of the appeal is practical. A conventional pool is, for much of the year, a covered object, a feature retreating from the garden rather than contributing to it. A natural pool, whatever its form, is a 365-day presence. In a wet summer or a long grey winter it reads as a water feature, reflecting sky and canopy, drawing in wildlife, holding its place in the garden. When hot days come, it's somewhere to swim. In a climate offering both extremes, often in the same year, that dual purpose feels increasingly relevant. We're also increasingly asked to incorporate saunas alongside pools; the hot and cold combination has real wellbeing benefits, and the best saunas we have designed are beautifully made timber structures, sitting quietly within the garden with well-considered windows framing views across the landscape. Used together, pool and sauna become something more than the sum of their parts: a reason to be outside in almost any weather, and a part of the garden that earns its place whatever the season.

Natural pools cover a wide spectrum. At one end sits the fully naturalistic swimming pond: planted margins, native species, open water that reads as entirely of the landscape. At the other, a contemporary lap pool with biological filters hidden beneath paving, crystal clear water, no chemicals, and a formal aesthetic to suit any modern garden. Between those two ends lie a considerable variety of options: chic and contemporary, or naturalistic and planted. The biology that keeps the water clean is the common thread.

One design decision that makes the greatest difference to how a natural pool reads within a garden is the choice of tile or liner colour. Dark tones create a surface with high reflective properties, doubling the sky, the canopy, the surrounding planting. On a bright day it's beautiful; on a grey British afternoon it still holds its character. A pale blue pool, by contrast, looks what it



A rural earth-dug swimming pond built by Water Artisans

Water's presence

is: a swimming pool that belongs somewhere warmer. Dark water looks like it belongs.

We're working on three different projects that illustrate the range. In Dorset, on the site of an old mill, we are completing a natural swimming pond with Ben at Water Artisans, a West Country specialist we've worked with across many projects. What Ben doesn't know about pools, pumps, boulders, and natural filters isn't worth knowing; he is also generous with that knowledge, which makes him genuinely good to have on site.

The pond has a contemporary rectangular swim zone at its centre, with two oak plank decks positioned to catch the sun at different times of day. We found three old millstones, which form stepping stones through the marginal planting towards the deeper water. They were not planned from the outset; we discovered them on site and they found their place. The pool sits in a steep-sided valley where water collects naturally, so its presence feels entirely unforced. In late May the marginal plants went in; this summer will be the first year of growth and the family finding out how they want to use it. The contrast with our Exmoor project couldn't

be greater. There, we took an old duck pond, emptied and extended it, and rebuilt it with large natural boulders forming steps into the water and a simple jetty for jumping or tying up paddleboards. Marginal species were selected to link to the surrounding moorland, and the pond sited so it appears fed by the stream running past the garden. The clients can see it from the house and watch the reflections shift through the day.

When that East Devon client described wanting water in their garden, I knew exactly what they meant. Some of my best days with the family are on the River Dart, swimming in still water, dragonflies overhead, the tree-lined banks reflecting off the surface. The solitude, the wildlife, the particular quality of natural water: these are not things that belong only to rivers and moorland pools. The best natural swimming ponds are trying to bring exactly that into a garden. The form changes. The feeling does not. ●

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