

# Hate chlorine? Leery of lakes? Here's a pool for you

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Natural swimming pools have been around in Europe for decades, but they only have been creeping into the United States for the past few years. Now, thanks to a growing interest in all things green and sustainable, will they catch on here?

Instead of using chlorine to clean the water, sustainable pools use a mix of plants and other aquatic vegetation to filter the water and rid it of bacteria; some companies add a UV or ozone sterilizer for extra protection against germs.

The plants filter and use naturally occurring bacteria to clarify the water, says Jason Bowen of Kane Bros., based in south suburban Homer Glen, which has created two natural pools in the Chicago area. The plants they use vary depending on region—in Illinois, Mr. Bowen says, they tend to stick with water lilies, sedges and different types of reeds and rushes. Depending on the design, the



*A natural swimming pond at Tryon Farm, an eco-development in Michigan City, Indiana. Photos by Bruce Juntgen*

plants can be incorporated into the swimming pool—or they can be in an adjacent body of water connected to the pool for a more traditional look, Mr. Bowen says. “It’s flexible and it varies from project to project.”

Joseph Shanahan, an emergency medicine doctor at Adventist GlenOaks Hospital, saw a natural pool display at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show at Navy Pier more than a decade ago and realized it was the perfect solution for his children, who were having allergic reactions to chlorine in chemical pools.

So in 2002 he had a natural pool, measuring 8 feet deep, 50 feet long and 30 feet wide, installed on his Hinsdale property for his children—and his koi fish.

“When the kids were young, they’d be in there all the time because they’d put on snorkels and fins and try to catch the fish fins, and the fish would try to bite them in the swimsuit, and it would be, ‘Catch—you’re it,’” Dr. Shanahan says. “It was hilarious. The fish were our pets.”

## LOW MAINTENANCE

“We like to try to make (the pool) look like it’s been there for a few thousand years.”

*Mick Hilleary, president, Total Habitat*

In cold regions such as Illinois, sustainable pools don’t need to be covered or drained because they don’t have the traditional tiled or sealed sides and tend to simply have either a rubber liner or a fiber-reinforced polyethylene. The liner is protected with stones and the ice won’t damage the pools.

The pools don’t need to be covered in the winter, says Mick Hilleary, founder and president of Total Habitat in Bonner Springs, Kansas. Mr. Hilleary helped design and create a natural pond at Tryon Farm, an eco-development in Michigan City, Indiana.

The Tryon pond has a 1,950-square-foot swim area. “It would seem kind of off to have a typical chemical pool in an environment like that,” says Dawn Heid, an architect who lives

at Tryon Farm on weekends and in Lincoln Park weekdays.

“The fish in natural pools are big enough so you don’t have to do anything to them in cold weather, either,” Mr. Hilleary says.

Once the water freezes, the pools can be used as small ice rinks, he says, while the plants will grow back on their own.

The price of a natural pool starts at about the same price as a high-end chlorine pool—but they tend to get more expensive very quickly. Costs typically range between \$75,000 and \$150,000.

The price of a traditional chlorine pool at Aqua Pools, which has locations in Homer Glen and Worth, averages around \$35,000 to \$40,000, manager Larry Charbonneau says.

## MORE COMPLICATED

James Robyn, CEO of BioNova Natural Swimming Pools, which is based in Chester, New Jersey, but installs natural pools nationwide, says his company’s pools start in the high five figures but most are well over \$100,000.

“They’re more complicated to build than a chemical pool,” Mr. Robyn says. “They take between two months and a year to build.” The reason? You’re essentially digging out the pool and then dealing with wildlife.

When Mr. Hilleary creates his natural pools, “we like to try to make it look like it’s been there for a few thousand years,” he says. “To pull that off, we have additional ledges of rock, so we try to make it



look like what nature would have made it look like.”

So while his standard natural pools may run from \$35,000 to \$50,000, the additional geology, fancy patios and landscaping to situate the pools add much more cost.

“Because they’re natural, they often beg for additional natural landscaping with geology and waterfalls,” Mr. Hilleary says.

Much of the maintenance of a natural pool is similar to a chemical pool—sans chemicals, Mr. Robyn says.

The pump basket and the filter must be cleaned and the pool vacuumed, and plants cut back and maintained, including, in some cases, being added and removed.

Dr. Shanahan says maintaining his natural pool has been easier and faster—about six minutes a day during the summer months—than his previous chemical pool because he doesn’t have to monitor chemical levels. He has the Kane Bros. team, who installed the pool for him, open and close the pool for him every year, but he deals with the daily maintenance himself.

Nearly all sustainable pool installers offer maintenance packages since most of the traditional pool maintenance people don’t have training in natural pools.

Chris Kane of Kane Bros. says many of his clients like to maintain their own pools because for them, it’s more like gardening.

“There’s plants involved, and people who like gardening tend to get these pools,” he says.