

A pond for swimming in



Our first look at a swimming pond was a few years ago at a big flower show held in the UK at Hampton Court. This is held annually in July on a spectacular site either side of the famous Long Water canal with an amazing view of Hampton Court Palace. We used to attend this show as volunteer helpers for a plant conservation charity called NCCPG.

The usual place for the water gardening exhibitors is by the side of the Long Water itself and strolling along this row of stands one morning my eye was caught by the sight of a pond with a little wooden jetty in it. A pond which was edged all around with long waving fronds of plants but, wait a minute ! I could see someone was

swimming in it as well ! I did a quick change of direction and headed straight for this pond - it looked lovely on a hot summer morning, a haven of calm, even on a busy showground. I did not know it yet but *this was my first swimming pond encounter!* I was now late for my turn on duty so I took the leaflet and, later on that day, took my husband along for a look as well. He was not quite so immediately smitten as I was but then, I am happy to admit to being a plantaholic!

There was no way we could fit a swimming pond into what was then our small town garden and so we had to wait a little while before we could seriously investigate the possibility of having our own natural swimming pond.

Our chance came with the move to Portugal, a long held dream of ours which we finally were able to realise when our continuing to live in (and cleaning!) a large three storey Victorian house seemed more than a bit daft ! We are lucky in that my husband can work from home due to the wonderful world wide web, albeit with the occasional necessary trip back to UK. We were able to buy a neglected house with four acres of old farming land in the eastern Algarve and, finally, we could think about a swimming pond. Well, that is, I could think about it - my husband was not too sure about all this 'swimming with plants' business and he had some questions I could not answer. How do you stop yourself tangling into the plants? Have you got to have fish in it? how do you keep the water clean ? what about the mosquitoes ? etc. etc. Sometimes being an engineer can be a dreadful handicap!

Now, these questions were understandable, bearing in mind that we had only limited experience of any ponds, swimming pools or other water features; our previous water feature having been a half barrel with a small pump and lots of cobbles! But, where could we find more information about swimming ponds in Portugal ? During our first few months in our new home much time was taken up with making things work, like the electricity, water and telephone for a start. One thing I had done long before we moved was to join the





Mediterranean Garden Society, thank goodness! Our previous garden was small, walled, hot and sandy and easily qualified as semi-desert for most of the year. A new branch of the MGS was in the process of being formed in Portugal and at one of our first get-togethers we found out that two of our fellow members run a business which builds swimming ponds (Piscina Biologica as they are called here) all over Portugal - Hurray! We were able to visit a mature swimming pond, look on their web site at pictures of other swimming ponds and my dear husband had all his »engineering« technical

type questions fully answered. The plants are in a separate area to the swimmers, no fish are allowed at all, and the water is clean and low in nutrients because of the plants which are growing in sand and gravel. The mosquitoes do not like clean water and all their natural predators do! He was hooked and I am afraid to say I just fell in love with the whole thing all over again, we could not wait for us to have one of our very own.

The site for the pond was not easy to choose, most normal swimming pools seemed to us to be too close to

the house for year round comfort. Who wants to look out on a vast expanse of cold blue water and concrete in the middle of winter? We did not really have a suitable site near the house as I am afraid I had already earmarked these for my gardening efforts. In the end, we had a couple of places we thought might be suitable and a favourite emerged after we had discussed it in situ with the experts. We were on our way at last!

The creation of a »natural« feature from a poor and fairly bare site was a fascinating process and the various steps needed only served to inform us more about our immediate environment and how we could safeguard it and nurture it. One of the first things we had to do was have the water tested which we would use to fill and top-up the pond. We have our own borehole so a sample was sent away for testing, chemical, bacteria and phosphate levels all had to be taken into account in order to introduce and establish the right plant community for our area.

Size and shape was really dictated by the site we had chosen as we did not want the pond to look at odds with it's setting. *The advice we received was very helpful* and factors which had to be taken into account included the number of people using the pond on a regular basis, wind direction, proximity of trees and aspect for maximum sunshine. We were lucky in that there were mature olive and almond trees on the margins of the area we had chosen and they have provided an invaluable »instant« mature setting for the pond.

The excavation dates were set and the machines arrived to tackle the job on schedule. Three days later, we had a huge hole in the ground and a very large pile of rocks!

Things moved fairly swiftly after that, adjustments for the final shape of the pond, deciding on a site for the solar panel to power the pump and filters and position of the jetty all became obvious and the hole was starting to look ready for the next stage, the liner! This is an amazing tough black material which a dedicated crew arrived to fit and weld on site. They also made the *floating walls which separate the planted areas from*



that used for swimming. When the first water started flowing into the pond we knew we were nearly there and as soon as the pond was filled, the plants could be settled into position.

This, for me, was the really exciting bit as I had never been able to be involved in planting so many moisture loving plants. I had wanted a shallow ledge all round the pond so that I could indulge in this kind of planting. When *Iris kaempferi* produced it's lovely dark blue flowers it was wonderful and gave an idea of what we could look forward to enjoying in the future.

The first swim was a very special moment and we were able to use the pond straight away after the planting was completed. We enjoyed a celebratory dip with the pond builders - well, the wheel barrows of gravel were heavy and it was a very hot day in June! Since then, *the pond has been an integral part of our lives*, being able to swim every day became part of our routine. I love being able to see the plants at eye level, watching for new growth, new flower buds and shoots. The unexpected bonus was being accepted as part of the local wildlife ! It is really something to be swimming along and find that the swallows are pond dipping for a drink further along the water, or that the huge azure blue and smaller coral red dragon flies are flitting about or sitting in the gravel on the edge having

a drink. We have even seen a chameleon nonchalantly standing in the gravel having a slurp ! We have been told to expect the frogs to come calling but we have not seen any yet, they may find us in the winter when it rains. The regular visitors are the local bird population and we have placed some logs across rocks so that they have access to the water near the plants.

Now, I must make it clear that I am not exactly an expert swimmer, I do not like to get out of my depth too much and rarely swim in the sea. The beauty of our swimming pond is that I can have a swim up and down, or around and around and then just sit on the floating wall and watch the birds having a drink, check the plants or just look at the trees. Believe me, this is very pleasant on a hot summer's day after you have been doing a bit of work in the garden.

We encourage everyone to try it and all *our visitors have loved using the pond*. We are gradually tackling the landscaping around the pond and have used much of the excavated rocks to form long sloping walls with rock seats set into them. We have taken the opportunity to use gravel around the pond instead of paving stones or concrete and will be able to plant out native grasses, trees and shrubs so that the pond merges







into it's setting in the garden. We only have to look at the surrounding native plants to find examples of what it is possible to grow, and with minimal maintenance.

Swimming in the pond is a different experience to a conventional swimming pool or the sea. The water does not sting if it goes in my mouth or eyes. The water is softer and has some colour in it, sometimes green sometimes brown, but always clear and inviting. I find it is like making my way through liquid glass, it has amazing reflections because of the black colour of the liner and it seems to be warm very early in the day. Our pond is 180 m² and the plants are still young and

establishing themselves. It is a constant source of interest and it is pleasant just to sit by it. In our currently parched landscape, the pond is indeed a haven of calm away from the house, amongst the trees, an oasis for the wildlife, and for us.

Rosie Peddle (in 2009)

A swimming pond is much more ...

... than the sum of its parts. A swimming pond is for contemplation, communication and imagination - a shelter from the storms of modern living. It is our place to dream and sing, bathe and admire, to feel more alive among other living beings.

A swimming pond is biologically alive. It offers much more than simply the opportunity for a swim.

A different look each season - a new look every day!

It allows you to get close to nature in an extraordinary way, diving with frogs, smelling the sweet perfumes of water lily flowers - enchanting and inviting for everyone, even if not yet a nature lover.

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