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The 'natural' swimming pools cleansed by plants, not chemicals

Naturally purified freshwater ponds can be good for swimmers and the environment — as well as save money



A swimmer at King's Cross Pond Club

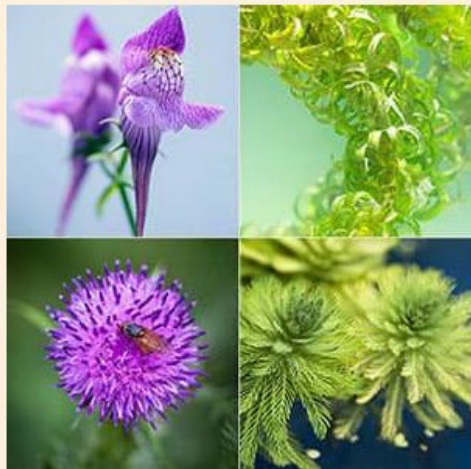
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JULY 24, 2015 by: Kate O'Brien

On a chilly day in June, I had my first swim in a natural (man-made) swimming pond. Shaped like a kidney, outlined in what felt like hazard tape, King's Cross Pond Club in north London is surrounded by a construction site, yet the water is pristine, purified naturally by aquatic plants: spiked water milfoil, water lily and galingale, to name a few.

While tough pioneers such as toadflax, wild thistle and purple loosestrife establish themselves on the soil along the border, the vegetation in this London pond varies according to depth. Water milfoil, Canadian pondweed and white waterlily are typical of deeper water, while common rush and yellow flag iris are characteristic of the margins. The plant-filter zone and regeneration area are where the plants do their work, separated by a barrier beneath the water surface to keep them from tangling with bathers in the swimming section. Submerged oxygenators absorb and transform superfluous nutrients into whorls of mare's tail and patches of lily pads, while marsh marigold and monkey musk make their bed by a smoky mattress of Norfolk reed. Poking out from the water, reed stems act like snorkels, taking oxygen from the air and releasing it back into the water through their roots.

Fresh water with no chemical disinfectants is good for swimmers' skin, and attracts a host of acrobatic insects. Old-world creatures such as damselfly feed on mosquito larvae, using leggy stems of flag iris to emerge from the water for their flirtatious flight. Flicking metallic wings wink at others: pond skaters, water boatmen and iridescent dragonfly. Surprisingly for their size, many aquatic species depend on freshwater ponds for refuge, including more than 100 UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. Despite the building work, swimming chemical-free at King's Cross Pond Club feels very natural. If only there were more.



From left: Three birds toadflax; welshed thistle; diamond milfoil; Canadian pondweed

Indeed, the tide may well be turning against chlorine, with 20,000 man-made chemical-free pools in Europe, and their popularity gaining in the US. The + POOL is a crowdfunded pool conceived by designers Family and PlayLab for the Hudson river. It will filter 600,000 gallons of polluted New York river water every day without chemicals. Another freshwater swimming option in London could materialise with Studio Octopi's Thames Baths Project, which proposes using reed beds, rushes and salt marsh flora as filters for its floating pontoon near Victoria Embankment. Protected areas of planting ranging from saline plants such as

sea beet and sea aster to freshwater species including yellow flag iris would mimic the stages of succession from salt marsh to freshwater wetland.

Rather than utilitarian landscapes behind chain fences, where cattails and tussock sedge are put to work for waste management or flood control, projects such as this employ wetland plants for pleasure. Getting to know them by swimming, we understand their value in terms of wellbeing and are more likely to want to protect them.
