

Where to take a dip, as nature intended it

Swimming ponds can offer a chlorine-free alternative to pools.
Genevieve Roberts reports

Nestled between the high-rise residential and commercial blocks that make up the new development around King's Cross and St Pancras stations in London is an oasis in a surprising form. A 40m-long chemical-free pond, surrounded by wildflowers, welcomes swimmers to escape urban life by taking a dip. Developed by a team of architects working in conjunction with artists, the King's Cross Pond Club is part-art installation, part-public pool. The kidney bean-shaped body of cool blue water could not be more of a contrast with Rio's murky green diving pool. And for any Olympic-watchers taken by yesterday's open water swimming event, this could be the place to embrace the delights of wild swimming.

The King's Cross pond is the first man-made public swimming pond in the UK – but there are plans for plenty more. An application for a heated, covered pool in Wapping in east London is pending – and in the West Country. In total, there are more than 500 natural public pools across Europe – and the idea seems to be gathering new pace in the UK. More and more people are installing natural ponds in their gardens, in place of chlorinated pools.

Biotop, the company behind the King's Cross Pond, is Europe's leading natural pool designer. Founded in Austria three decades ago, the company offers two types of ponds: natural swimming ponds and living pools, which look like conventional swimming pools but use plankton, rather than chlorine, to keep the water clear.

They also offer kits which, for £15,000, allow customers to convert their chlorinated pool over to a natural filtration

system. "Chlorine is a strong chemical and can give people eczema," says Jane Southcott, spokeswoman for Biotop. "When you swim in a natural pool, you feel cleaner than when you went in. They're good for the environment too, with each pond supporting a whole ecosystem."

Will Woodhouse, managing director of Woodhouse Pools, builds ponds in private homes that start at around £50,000 for 60 sq m. His company also offers pool conversions, transforming chlorinated pools to ponds.

While conventional pools rely on chemicals to keep the water clean, ponds use the purifying properties of plants and microorganisms. "If you have a lot of plants, providing oxygen, you'll have a huge zooplankton population," Mr Woodhouse says.

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Plants take nutrients from the water, so algae is unable to grow.

A live bacteria bed keeps the pool clean, installed in the foam filter in natural pools, or under the plants in a grit or sand filter in swimming ponds. Water constantly passes through, and is oxygenated.

Both ponds and natural pools share the same quality of water, but in a natural pool the filter must be switched on to clean the water. The filter extracts phosphorus (which was responsible for the green algae in the Olympic pool) with an iron compound to ensure the water stays clear. "If you want the pool water to maintain itself, without using a pump, you have to have half of the area filled with plants," Mr Woodhouse says.

Swimming ponds made by Biotop are kept clean naturally

