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Your Guide to Home Style from The Houston Chronicle

Special Section: Power of the Pool
Homes Good for You & the Environment

PLUS: New Finds, Exterior Makeovers & A New Landscaping Plan

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Power of the Pool

By Lisa Richards
Special to Beautiful Home

Get in the swim
with Beautiful Home
as we dive into
Houston's invigorating
pool resources.





Jerry Powers/American Color

Project Pool Perfection

Pretty, playful or practical – there's a pool for every purpose under the Houston sun.

For increasing numbers of Houston homeowners, pools are about mind as much as body. They can be a 24-hour source of therapy for what ails you.

"What you're creating is not a swimming pool but an environment," said Chris Smith, a landscape architect and partner in Marquise Pool. "It's about relaxing, decompressing, escaping from stress."

And today's homeowners have more options than ever for creating the environment that's right for them. They can influence the shape, color, texture and overall ambience of the pool and its surroundings.

"We can do anything," said Chris Esposito, owner of USA Pool & Spas. "Our biggest plus is our creativity." Esposito believes in "extreme" customer service and quality, beginning every job with careful consultations with the homeowner. The company specializes in Torreon travertine features to give its pools a distinct style and look.

Previous page: a Marquise Pool (top) contains separate sunning, spa and swimming areas. A wading pool (center)

designed by Susana Jimenez Pelton, ASID, and engineered by Sunshine Pools perfects the art of contemplation.

A Polynesian-inspired oasis (bottom) is fashioned from Bedrock Pools' trademarked Bedrock Stone. Above, the Jimenez-Pelton creation is 35 feet long and bordered by a lush greenscape.

Maintaining Perfection

The maintenance end of pool ownership has plenty of options today, said Anthony & Sylvan general manager Jay Bellar. In addition to traditional hand-held vacuums, customers can opt for automatic pool cleaners that daily move along floors, walls and steps.

Houston-based Challenger Pools, which builds in-ground pools and spas, manufactures a built-into-the-floor cleaning system with long-term cost savings, general manager Sam Williams said. The EnvironPool™ system moves water in the pool to three return points. Inspired by the rotations made by a lawn sprinkler, it saves users about 50 percent on chemicals and 35 percent on heating costs according to company research.

Ideal Pools' president Joe Forbert points out that the make of a pool can affect its durability and ease of maintenance. Ideal's self-contained circulation systems contain elements that each operate independently. If there's a problem with one of the skimmers, for example, the entire system isn't shut down.

Anthony & Sylvan offers a salt-water system for treating pool water. Separating sodium from chloride to sanitize and soften water, the system has 100 times less salt than seawater, said Bellar, and is gentle on the eyes.

"It's important to remember that along with great style, homeowners want functionality," said Blue Haven's Lazlo. Once maintenance options are resolved, pools can be a lasting source of comfort and relaxation.



"It's endless what people can do today," said Brett Madden, co-owner of Custom Clear Pools remodeling business, owner of Tile Rescue and manager of Clear Pool.

It's also important for consumers to know that pool companies are unregulated in Houston, so Marquise's Smith suggests knowing the credentials and experience of a pool firm before you hire it. Also, check for Better Business Bureau complaints and a published reference list. Find out when the company registered with the county in order to see how long it's been in business.

Taking shape

Once customers have selected a company and/or designer, they can begin to explore aesthetic factors such as shape and size. Ideal Pools takes a unique approach to helping customers visualize their product. "We draw the pool in the house on a computer," owner and president Joe Forbert said. "We let the customers do what they want, and we're there to help them along the way."

If a pool is there to enhance the look of the yard, a small body of water may be sufficient. If the owners want to swim laps or work out, they'll need more length and depth. The pool's placement is an important factor as well. Richard Roth, president and owner of Contempo Pools & Spas, said, "The pool is going to be the focal point of the yard. You should center it. A pool done right is like adding a room to the house."

And customers shouldn't forget to leave ample space around the pool for people and furniture. If you plan to entertain, you'll need even more decking around the sides and front of the pool.

Landscaping helps establish a pool as the focal point of the yard, said Marquise's Smith. It also blocks undesired sights and sounds and increases homeowners' privacy.



Looking for all the world like a Polynesian paradise, this Bedrock Pool creation offers multiple entries, a sitting ledge and an artful sculpture to watch over things (see close up, p. 22).



The soothing sounds of moving water are featured in a bubbling fountain, far left, from Bedrock Pools, weeping rocks in a Marquise pool, left, and artificial symmetry from Challenger Pools, below.

Dream pool

Susana Jimenez Pelton, owner of Houston-based design firm liner 2, recently helped a Piney Point family develop the pool of its

dreams. "We have many elements that make this a temple to nature and beauty," said Pelton, who incorporated ideas from her visiting brother, Fernando Jimenez, a pool designer from France, in this project.

Pelton and her clients opted for a 35-foot-long, narrow pool that plays off of the house's modern, angular lines. Sunshine Pools provided the engineering blueprints.

Pelton optimized the limited space available by creating a vanishing edge on one side of the pool. The opposite rounded edge is bounded by lush trees and a bayou. In the center of the pool, admiring his reflection, is a sculpture of Narcissus. The pool area is further enhanced by an outdoor living room with a fire pit; a triple, freestanding portico; and a large exterior mirror that reflects the fire and the surrounding woods.

Pelton encourages homeowners to keep the lines of communication open with designers and pool builders. "Ask questions until you can feel that pool, feel that room, feel that deck before it is built," she said.

Material world

One of the more overwhelming aspects of pool planning is selecting materials. "On one end you have the standard white plaster most people are familiar with, and on the other end there are products like Pebble Tek or Diamond Bright, exposed aggregate that looks like a natural surface. It gives the water a different look, and that gives the whole yard a

different look," said Custom Clear Pool's Madden.

Blue Haven Pools, which operates three Houston offices, gives its pools a smooth, colored quartz finish on the interior. "Beyond its distinctive appearance, quartz is slip-resistant, yet smooth on your feet," said national marketing director R'nelle Larzo. "It also delivers real value with lasting color and superb resistance to stains and erosion."

A popular decking option is the concrete topper, which can be sprayed on in a range of patterns and colors. According to Jay Bellar, general manager at Anthony & Syban, homeowners also can use natural, hand-carved stone or exposed aggregate, which looks like natural materials. "It's not like the old days when everyone had concrete decking," he said. Options for the outer borders of the pool, called coping, range from bricks to natural stone and cut marble.

John Shiffert, senior design and project manager with Houston Pool Design Construction Co., said customers also have about 100 choices for the pool's waterline tile, which is fixed to be freeze-proof. "People tend to go more toward natural looks now rather than blue tile," he said. "There are more choices than there ever used to be."

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Custom touches take pools from the far out to the sublime.

Going Wild

Photos by Jerry Powers/American Color

When people ask Greg Mayor what he does for a living, the Bedrock Pools master sculptor says he creates the exotic and the extraordinary.

Mayor's Houston-based company won't even take clients who want traditional pools. Each of its products is custom made. "The more interesting and the more unique, the more we like it," Mayor said.

After extensive interviews with the client, Mayor's been known to work 30 hours at a time to bring images from his imagination to life, including quite a few sea creatures lately. Most special requests are based on aesthetics, but Mayor also adds features for comfort, such as therapeutic spas with lumbar support, armrests and nearby drink holders.

Interest in the way-out and wild seems to be increasing among area pool customers. USA Pool & Spas owner Chris Esposito is putting the finishing touches on a custom pool in Cypress that includes a cold spa area with a table in it and a 6-foot-wide, 15-foot-long bridge over it.



The Marquette Pools creation (top) in Cypress, TX, is 53 feet long and can accommodate water-lovers of all types. Above is a witchful Polynesian statue from Bedrock Pools.

Houston-based Marquise Pools has been creating custom-molded spa seats, slides emerging from rocks and underwater grottos, reports partner and landscape architect Chris Smith. The grottos basically are large, underwater rooms that can hold a waterproof TV, underwater speakers or lighting. "People can go in there, relax and watch a ball game," said Smith.

Grottos are popular with people who entertain, along with swim-up bars and tables. Other "out-there" possibilities include floating columns, urns or boulders.

Special lighting features include fiber optic mushrooms from Marquise and rotating color wheels from Anthony & Sylvan.

Jay Bellar, Anthony & Sylvan general manager, said, "The house has four colors, which create a new spectrum as they mix. You can stop it on an individual color or keep it changing. For Christmas the pool can be green and the spa red."

Pool features also can add a creative touch to exercise. Owners can add swim jets that create water pressure for swimming in place, Bellar said. And pool owners can place handrails beneath the water for holding on and kicking in place.



A 9-by-12-foot mirror on the side of the house reflects the lush poolside greenery and the fire when it's going in the outdoor fireplace. Susana Jimenez-Pelton, ASID, added plenty of comfortable seating to insure relaxation.



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Wild for water features

For many people, the addition of water features truly makes the pool. "Waterfalls can make a huge difference," said Raleigh Jenkins, president of ABC Pest, Pool & Lawn. "It's not just the visual; it's the sound of the water flowing." Customers can opt for water flowing over bricks, moss rock, limestone or artificial material designed to have a specific look, he said. Sheer descent waterfalls flow straight down over a smooth surface.

According to Contempo's Roth, the No. 1 water feature in Houston is the spa. A standard spa has a straight wall and some bubbles, but customers can customize it with sloped walls and strategically placed water jets.

Additional water feature options include weeping rocks to the side of the pool, deck jets that shoot water into the pool, bubble jets in the pool, vanishing edges that send water into catch basins and beach entries with gradual inclines. Ideal Pools' Forbert said.

A once-common pool element that's making a departure is the diving board. ABC's Jenkins noted that the "diving rock" is becoming a popular alternative. "It doesn't shoot out as far as the diving board, and it's more aesthetically pleasing," he said.

Once all of the pool elements are in place, homeowners can tie them in neatly to an ultra-manageable control system. "You can control the whole pool from inside the house: heater, lights, waterfall, everything," Forbert said. "Homeowners even can activate the controls from their cell phones on the way home."

