

just add water



Photos by Garry Menendez

"Summertime and the livin' is easy..." especially if you think before you plant around your pool. This time of year, Southerners are looking for ways to beat the heat. For those fortunate enough to own a pool, you need only dash out the back door and take the plunge. The rest of us will head to the beach or local swimming hole. There is no doubt that building and maintaining a swimming pool can be costly. This cost is compounded even more when you have a high maintenance or poorly functioning landscape around this body of water. What follows are some thoughts to consider when designing or perhaps redesigning your poolside landscape.

By Garry Menendez

Vulnerability

For many of us, this is a frightening time of the year. Inhibitions and shyness must give way to exposure and showing your imperfect body. We take special care to select a swimsuit that will minimize our perceived flaws. We must also take care when selecting plants that may come uncomfortably close to all that exposed flesh. Avoid plants near a pool that have sharp, course leaves or thorns. You may know enough to avoid them but little mermaids won't give them a second thought when dashing across the beds to retrieve the errant beach ball.

Also, if you desire lots of color around your pool think about consolidating plants that bloom during swim season in areas away from the lounge chairs. Flowers and bees are natural buddies and while the risk of being stung is minimal, the panic that strikes those allergic to these guys may be enough for a zap. Consider making your color portable. Planting flowers in containers is an easy way to enhance all of that decking surface around the pool and it gives you the flexibility of rearranging this color to suit changing pool use. When considering woody plant material, select flowering shrubs and trees that bloom before May or after August (swim season).

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Screening the Uglies

With pools come a few features that may not be all that attractive. Plant some evergreens in front of the pool equipment (filter, heater, etc.) to hide this from prominent view. Make sure you still have access, as you will be tinkering with these gadgets probably more often than you'd like. If you don't have the space to plant much, consider constructing a wooden fence panel no higher than the equipment and plant some vines such as Carolina jasmine, clematis or crossvine against it to soften the look.

The same can be done near the fence. Some fences are attractive on their own but most could use some help. Whether it's a wooden panel, aluminum rail, wrought iron or chain link, some diverse landscaping in the foreground will create an appealing transition from pool area to neighboring properties. Mix up these screen plantings. A blend of magnolia, American holly, Japanese black pine and viburnum are much more interesting than a row of hemlock, wax-leaf ligustrum or any other monoculture. It's also much easier to replace one of these after several years of growth than it is to locate an 8 to 10-foot specific plant.



Using ornamental grasses here softens the hard edges of this rock wall adjacent to the pool.

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Edge Treatment

Whenever I design a pool and the accompanying landscape, the question always arises about lawn and grass clippings in the water. There are two thoughts here. One is to plant low lying groundcovers adjacent to the pool which will eventually fill in and create a pleasing layer between the pool and taller plants. If this is your choice, pay careful attention that the mulch you select for these plantings “rolls down” and ends at a point below adjacent paving. The pool itself creates enough maintenance without having to place mulch back into its proper place.

The other thought is to design a simple coping (surface edge treatment around perimeter of pool) and let grass come right up to this. It is a little more maintenance as you must bag the clippings or make sure all grass is discharged away from the water, but the effect can be beautiful. Also, if anyone under 60 uses your pool, you will have considerable splashing and chlorinated water seeping into your beds, so be sure to choose plants that can tolerate this.

Heat Island

It should come as no surprise that most pools are situated in full, blazing sun. This fact combined with reflection off water and paved surfaces will cook your landscape. No rhododendron or azaleas here. Select plants that will thrive in these conditions. Many perennials, hollies, spirea, etc. should do fine under these conditions. Another excellent choice is any of the ornamental grasses available today. They create a somewhat nautical feel and give exciting movement and texture to the landscape. Be careful when selecting the varieties though. Some cultivars that intrigue you at the garden center may grow to be 6 to 8 feet tall. Dwarf fountain grass is a favorite of mine. It stays low and looks gorgeous when used in masses.



This is not to say that you can't or shouldn't have trees near your pool. If you're planting, select trees that don't bear late spring flowers, fruit or nuts and try to look for varieties which drop all of their fall leaves during a concentrated period of time. If you are fortunate enough to have some existing trees, keep at least those that may cast a shadow on part of your decking. If you have no trees and don't desire to add any, at least consider building some sort of shade structure nearby such as an open sided pavilion, gazebo or arbor with climbing vines. This will be welcomed by many, especially those forgetting the sunscreen.

Beyond the Bushes

Designing a pool and its garden can be both challenging and rewarding. You must also learn to think "beyond the bushes." That is, look at the big picture if you're starting from scratch. Such choices as selecting the color of the pool interior can have a huge effect on appearance. Choosing a darker color, for instance, can create a psychologically cooling effect and convey more of an old-fashioned "swimming hole" mood. These colors also complement large existing trees. Surface selection should blend in with the surrounding setting and architecture and have good traction when wet.

I have found some of my best projects to be those which have limited decking around the pool. For instance, placing hard surface on three sides and allowing landscaping to come to the water's edge on the fourth creates a beautiful garden feeling where the pool becomes as much a water feature as a recreational entity. Lighting has gained acceptance as a vital landscape element and there is no better place to experiment with a low voltage system than around a body of water. When the lights in the pool are turned off and the water is

still, you can design dazzling, mirrored effects by uplighting trees on the end of the pool opposite the viewer.

Summer will soon yield to the cooler seasons, but rest assured, it will return. So while you're lazily floating on that raft, think about some of the tips mentioned here to transform your pool into an oasis. And don't forget the sunscreen! ☀

