Hannah’s natural swimming pool

When we moved into our current property seven years ago the garden was one of the main attractions, as it is with most gardeners. It was south and west facing, about one acre in total and had lots of untapped potential.

One of the main eyesores in the garden was a large building containing a heated indoor swimming pool, a chemical one, so chlorine was the main way of clearing it. The building was a solid shed with patio doors on the south side but otherwise had little light coming in; this meant that the building blocked all the evening sun as it faced west up the garden. And finally, but by no means least, a chemical pool meant handling chemicals, which I found really toxic.

The water needs to be turned over slowly and constantly during the day to allow this process to take place. The more nitrates and phosphates that can be removed from the water the clearer and cleaner the water will be.

The shallow area, which is planted, has different depth zones on my pool and the plant combinations are very important. As it is essentially a reed bed system, you need a bulk of reeds, especially Cyperus longus, commonly called ‘Sweet Galingale’, to do the cleaning work.

Cyperus longus is native to the UK and has long, bright green, strap-like leaves; the fronds appear in the summer. Ideally this should be planted in a depth of up to 50cm and it basically forms the lungs of the pond. It is a very vigorous plant and I cut mine back hard in the spring to get the growth when it’s needed most (more on this later). As I wanted to undertake this project as sustainably as possible we recycled the whole building. The doors and windows were sold as sustainably as possible we recycled the whole building.

The regeneration zone on my pool then moves into a deeper section, with different depth zones on my pool and the plant combinations are very important. As it is essentially a reed bed system, you need a bulk of reeds, especially Cyperus longus, commonly called ‘Sweet Galingale’, to do the cleaning work. Cyperus longus is native to the UK and has soft fern-like leaves and helps add oxygen to the water. It is also the plant preferred by newts to wrap their eggs in during the spring months and it grows well under the water lilies.

This deep section (around 90cm) is an excellent habitat for newts and pond life but in a swimming pool it also helps to reduce the nutrient levels even further by allowing the microorganisms that allow the plants to take the nutrients only from the water, so each plant root system must be washed when it is planted to avoid any nitrates or phosphates entering the water. The second plant that needs to be included in the main reed bed section is the common wildflower, Cyperus cristatus or great crested nut rush, which is much larger, in fact about three times as large, and is a protected species. Newts are amphibians and so are only in water from around April to October and the crest is only on the males in the breeding period in spring. During the winter months they need a place to hibernate, and so alongside the main plant we have built a ‘hibernacula’ – a dry place that the newts can crawl into and be undisturbed until spring.

Our pool is not yet finished, although it is working well and the water quality is good.

I need to fit a wildlife-friendly filter system and add some more plants to completely fill the regeneration area but, as I reflect on the journey of building this pool and learning about natural swimming, I have to say I am completely hooked and an enthusiastic convert.

Imagine my delight, therefore, to be invited to the first UK natural swimming pool open to the public. It is situated in Kings Cross and is run by the Kings Cross Pond Club. The pool was built by a Biotop company called Kingscross Aquacare Ltd (details below). The Biotop system has been used to build pools all over Europe and is a much more sophisticated version of what we have built but the basic theory is the same. The swimming area at Kings Cross is, of course, much larger, allowing one hundred and fifty people in to swim each day. The whole pool is raised, allowing no contaminated run off water to ever enter it. The water is fresh and bathers must have a shower before entering the water to make sure they take no oils (usually sun tan oil) into the water with them. The water quality was very impressive, even with such a high usage. There was less apparent wildlife than I have in my pool but I still had the same feeling of being at one with nature and swimming in clear, unpolluted, soft water – and that, in the middle of Kings Cross on a busy weekday, is simply wonderful.

I do believe these pools and this type of unpolluted swimming alongside nature is the way ahead. If you are intrigued and want to find out more about natural swimming pools, visit:

www.bio.top
www.kingscross.co.uk
www.kings-cross-pond-club
www.hannahgenders.co.uk

Marginal plants take up nitrates and phosphates in order to mitigate nutrient loadings.

Planting and filtration is all done by Aquacare Ltd. The Biotop system takes in and manages the water in the regeneration zone.

Hannah set up her landscape design business twenty years ago, she has a passion for creating beautiful gardens that are sustainable and wildlife friendly. She holds a degree in Landscape Design, Diploma qualifications in amenity horticulture and grade 2 Braile. She is a Chelsea medal winner and BALI National Landscape Award winner.