By Katie Navarra

A Pond **for Every Property**

Incorporating pond installation services into an existing landscape business

Some people love water features. Others are downright passionate about them. Whether a client longs for the tranquility of a container-size pond that can be enjoyed on the back patio, or they are looking for a soothing escape from the frenzied pace of daily life, there is a pond solution for any size landscape.

The relationship you'll develop with a client who wants a pond is different from any other client relationship you'll find. "You may have put in a $100,000 patio and the customer won't remember your name," said Brian Helfrich, construction manager at Aquascape, Inc. "But you put in a $5,000 pond and you'll get birthday cards for the rest of your life!"

Getting started with ponds

Selling a pond is the most difficult aspect of incorporating pond installation services into an existing landscape business.

"Ponds are about style and personal preference," said Helfrich. "When you sell them, you have to think of them as a piece of artwork rather than a product."

The placement of rocks within the pond distinguishes one project from the next.

"It's not really hard to build a pond," he said. "It's physically demanding moving the rocks around. There is no right or wrong way to build a pond."

Practice makes perfect. Start with a pond at your own home. "Make it a classroom, live with it so you can talk about it with your customers," Helfrich suggested. "Ponds are an emotional purchase and a hobby. The more you're able to talk with a customer about caring for one, the better able you'll be to sell one."

Since pond projects are unique from other landscape installations, a consultation is critical. Get to know the client. Ask why they want a pond, and what inspired them to purchase a pond. "Build it according to the clients likes and dislikes," he advised.

As you create a preliminary design, consider beginning inside the home. "When I design a pond, I design from inside the house," said Helfrich. Regardless of how avid an outdoor person the homeowner is, they will spend most of their time enjoying the pond from inside their home. "On a day that's 100 degrees with 100 percent humidity, or in the dead of winter, they will not be outside," he said.

With that in mind, he recommends designing the pond so that at least some piece of it — a bubbling rock, a portion of the waterfall, etc. — is visible through a window in the kitchen, living room, dining room or bedroom.

In addition to visibility, the second most important aspect to consider is size. "The number one complaint everyone says when the pond is finished is that they wish they went bigger," he added. As fish, plants, bubbling rocks and other features are added to the pond, the body of water looks smaller and smaller.

"It's an addictive hobby; and when the client is finished and sits back to relax and enjoy the pond, they start thinking about adding another waterfall or moving the edge one way or the other a few feet," he said. Encourage the client to start with a pond slightly larger than what they're comfortable with. "They'll never regret," he said.

A pond for any setting

Ponds are versatile, and can be designed to fit into any client's budget and landscape décor. From patio-size ponds for urban settings to larger ponds designed for recreation, fish or gardens, there is a pond to suit every client's property.

Fish ponds

Nearly 30 percent of pond owners purchase a pond specifically for fish. "Fish ponds are an elaborate hobby," said Helfrich said. "A client may pay $10,000 for a pond, and then stock it with fish more valuable than many people's homes."

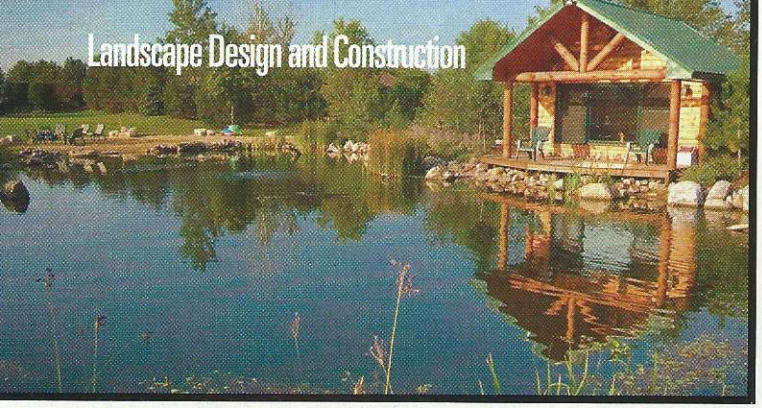
Pond size is critical in a fish pond. It should be at least two feet deep. "If the fish are allowed to multiply or are expected to grow larger, the initial pond should be large enough to accommodate that," he said. Fish can over-winter in a pond. "The smaller the body of water, the thinner the layer of ice, so two feet is plenty to overwinter fish."

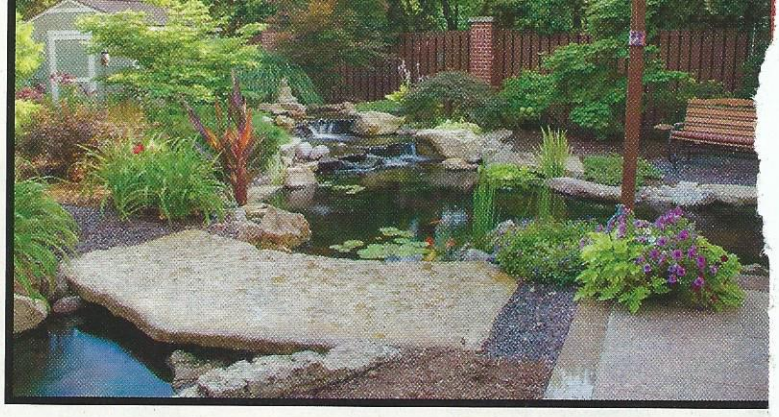
Clients aren't limited to stocking a pond with koi. The same goldfish you see at the pet store can make a good fit for a client's pond. Goldfish are resilient and a great starter fish for a new pond owner. A shubunkin is a single-tailed, long-bodied goldfish that differs from the koi in the fact that it doesn't have "barbells," which are whiskers of sorts that are used to root through gravel.

Water gardens

Water gardens are equally as popular as fish ponds. Another 30 percent of pond owners purchase a pond because they are avid gardeners and they consider a water garden an extension of their soil-based plants. "A water garden extends their gardens, allowing

Patio ponds are ideal water features for clients in urban settings.
All photos provided by Aquascape, Inc.





Left: Recreation ponds are most popular in Europe, but are gaining in popularity in the United States. **Right:** Ponds can incorporate plants and fish into one beautiful water feature.

for plants like water lilies, lotuses, water ferns and others that they couldn't have before," Helfrich explained.

Plants, like fish, help balance a pond's ecosystem. Plants provide valuable biological filtration that removes nitrogen, ammonia, nitrates and other minerals from pond water. These excess nutrients are often the cause of unsightly water conditions.

Depth is a critical component for any successful water garden. Certain plants won't grow in shallow water, and others won't grow in deep water.

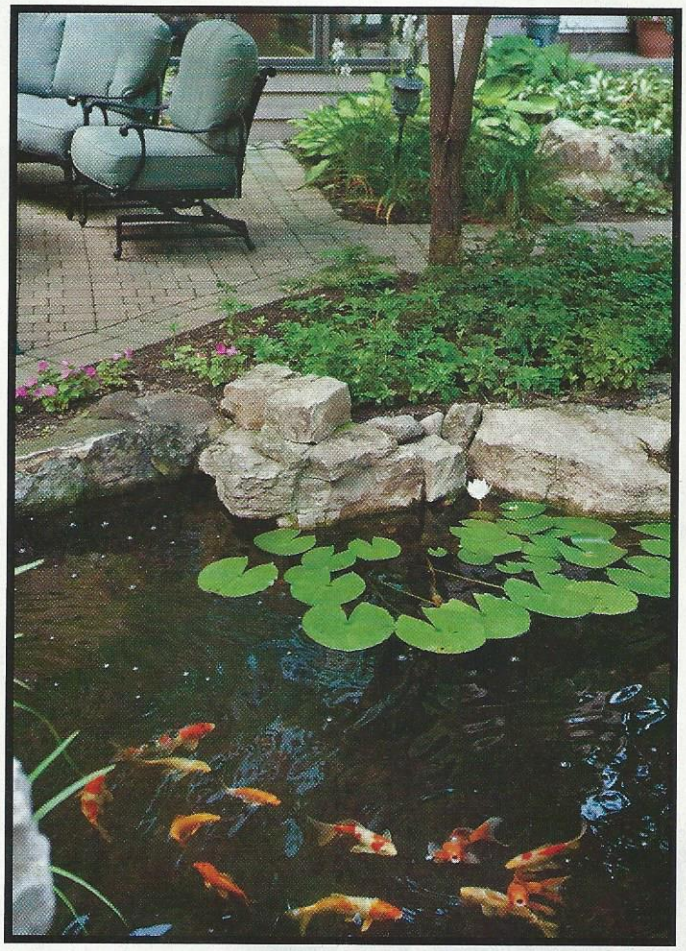
Recreation/swim ponds

Recreation ponds, also called swim ponds, are most popular in Europe and are beginning to catch on in the United States. "My generation is used to swimming in murky ponds where the fish and plants are out of sight out of mind," Helfrich said. "Recreation/swim ponds are crystal clear — you can see the bottom and the fish — so it takes some people some getting used to."

Recreation ponds are as diverse as the homeowners who request them. "The one at my house is large enough for my kids to get in with swimmies and snorkel around while the adults can take in a lounge chair and sit in it," he explained.

Some clients may request a pond large enough to swim a lap in. Others may be more interested in creating a beach like entrance or incorporating a swim-up bar. "There are no chemicals and no chlorine, it's an all-natural eco-system that one can swim in too," he said. "The aquatic plants act as the filtration system in wetlands to clean the ponds."

Koi are the most popular fish for fish ponds, but other types of fish can be placed in a pond as well.



Patio ponds

Just because clients living in ubran areas are limited on available space doesn't mean they have to go without a pond. Patio ponds bring the soothing sights and sounds of a water feature to a deck or patio of any size.

A single water lily or a few fish may be all a client needs to appreciate the serenity a water feature can provide.

Contained in a stone bowl, trough or decorative container, a patio pond can hold a "mini" water garden in any setting. According to Helfrich, patio ponds allow everyone to enjoy the hobby.

Shape, size and finished look will vary from one manufacturer to another providing for an option to suit any client's tastes. Though smaller than ponds found on suburban or rural properties, patio ponds can be enhanced with fountains, illumination and other desired features.

It's a lifestyle

"Ponds are never an impulse purchase," Helfrich said. "Ponds trigger a memory from childhood, or a person has watched a neighbor enjoy their pond the last few years and decides it's time to put one on their property."

Regardless of the motivation for installing a pond, clients will tell you it's better than a swimming pool. "Ponds bring in so much wildlife. They bring in thousands of varieties of birds, turtles and butterflies," he concluded. "For families with kids, it becomes the perfect outdoor classroom."

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Beyond Fire Pits and Pergolas

Create customized outdoor living spaces

Outdoor kitchens, fire pits and pergolas are buzzwords for residential landscape contractors.

Demand for these design features remains strong. In a survey conducted by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), which polled residential landscape architects about the estimated popularity of various design elements for 2014, 94.2% of respondents agreed gardens/landscaped spaces would be the hottest trend of the season; and 92% anticipated kitchens and entertainment spaces would also be in high demand.

While the results likely come as little surprise, the challenge for landscape contractors is to offer a blend of services that incorporates these features to create a customized living space that seamlessly transitions indoor amenities with the tranquility of the outdoors.

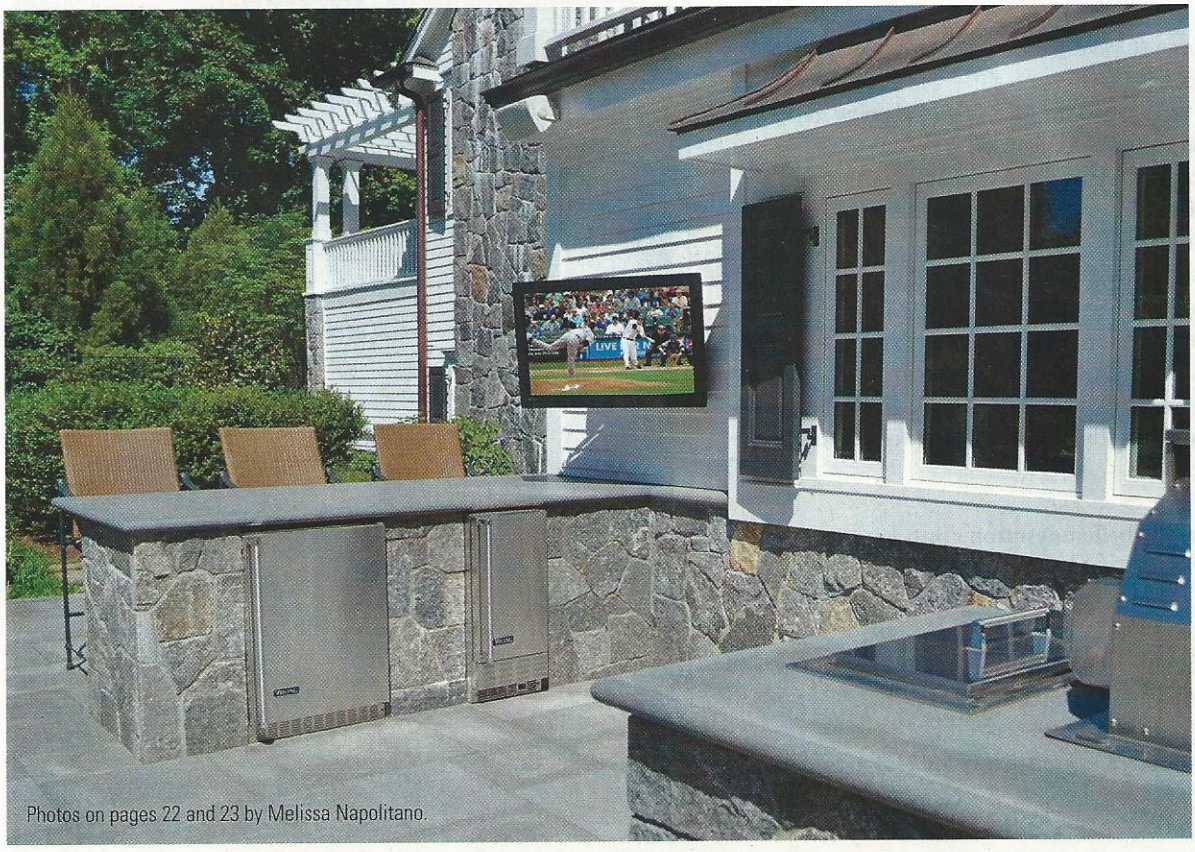
Entertainment systems

Outdoor living spaces have truly become an extension of one's home. Outdoor ranges, refrigerators and fire pits provide all of the comforts of the indoors, with the benefit of being outdoors. With a homeowner's interest in enjoying the conveniences of their homes while outside, it's only natural a television and/or sound system be incorporated into the design.

"A lot of people will put it (the television) by the BBQ, as it really allows them to get the most out of their backyard," said Corey Felter of Soundworks in Armonk, N.Y. "They can be outside, spend time with their family, and catch the game."

Designed to tolerate changing weather conditions, manufacturers have released televisions specifically designed for outdoor installation. New televisions designed specifically for outdoor use are heated and cooled to accommodate all weather conditions. "Some people think we can create a hook-up and they can move their TV from indoors to outdoors and back, but it's really not a good idea nor the ideal installation option," he added.

Whether used to enhance a TV's sound system or used to play tunes, an outdoor sound system sets the mood. Bulky, unsightly speakers are a thing of the past. Speakers are disguised as planters,



Photos on pages 22 and 23 by Melissa Napolitano.

flower pots or even installed directly in the ground. "People are straying away from box speakers outside of the house because they ruin the ambiance," said Felter.

A recent Soundworks project included in-ground speakers and subwoofer in a client's basketball court. "It sounds amazing near a sports court, and it brings life to a party," he added.

Using direct burial wire, much like a lighting system, the installation of an outdoor sound system is relatively simple. "You do have to take into account voltage and how long the wire runs are going to be," Felter explained. "The wire length and gauge will determine the amps."

Ideally, discuss the potential for an outdoor entertainment system with a client at the same time they are discussing a larger renovation project. "It's better if all the contractors on the project can work together so we're not installing wire after the sod has gone down, but there are always ways to make it happen even if you're not included from the beginning," he said.

A remote control system goes hand-in-hand with an entertainment system "A lot of people like to change the volume or change the station from their lounge chair with a tablet or phone," Felter explained. "A really good network signal is needed to do that." In some cases, a secondary Internet access point is needed outdoors for smooth operation.

A new twist on gardens

As the ASLA survey indicated, gardens and landscaped areas are one of the most commonly requested design features in residential properties. What's interesting for 2014 is the unique approach homeowners and designers are taking to gardens and landscaped areas.

With an increased focus on sustainability, gardens and landscapes that feature native plants, are sustainable, are easy to maintain and provide a source of fresh produce for the family are more prevalent. Sustainable landscapes cover a broad range of "themes" ranging from garden habitats to raised planting beds, keyhole gardens and rain gardens.

Garden habitats, often called backyard restorations, transition a planned landscape into an area brimming with native plant species. "Some are used to actually return more wildlife habitat or attract certain kinds of wildlife, like butterfly gardens," said Donny Duke of Engledow Group/Director of Litchfield Studio in central Indiana.

A garden habitat benefits wildlife by creating shelter and providing a source of food and water for native birds, bees, butterflies and other wildlife. "Others focus on lower maintenance native types of plant material, which give a more natural look," he added.

Property size and client expectations for landscapes are the most common challenges to creating a garden habitat. "The fact that most native plant materials best suited for many of these purposes is alien to most residential customers who are looking for more polished and full plant material," he said. "We have found some clients really enjoy the idea of this type of creation, but struggle to accept the more native plant species because they lack a more formal appearance."

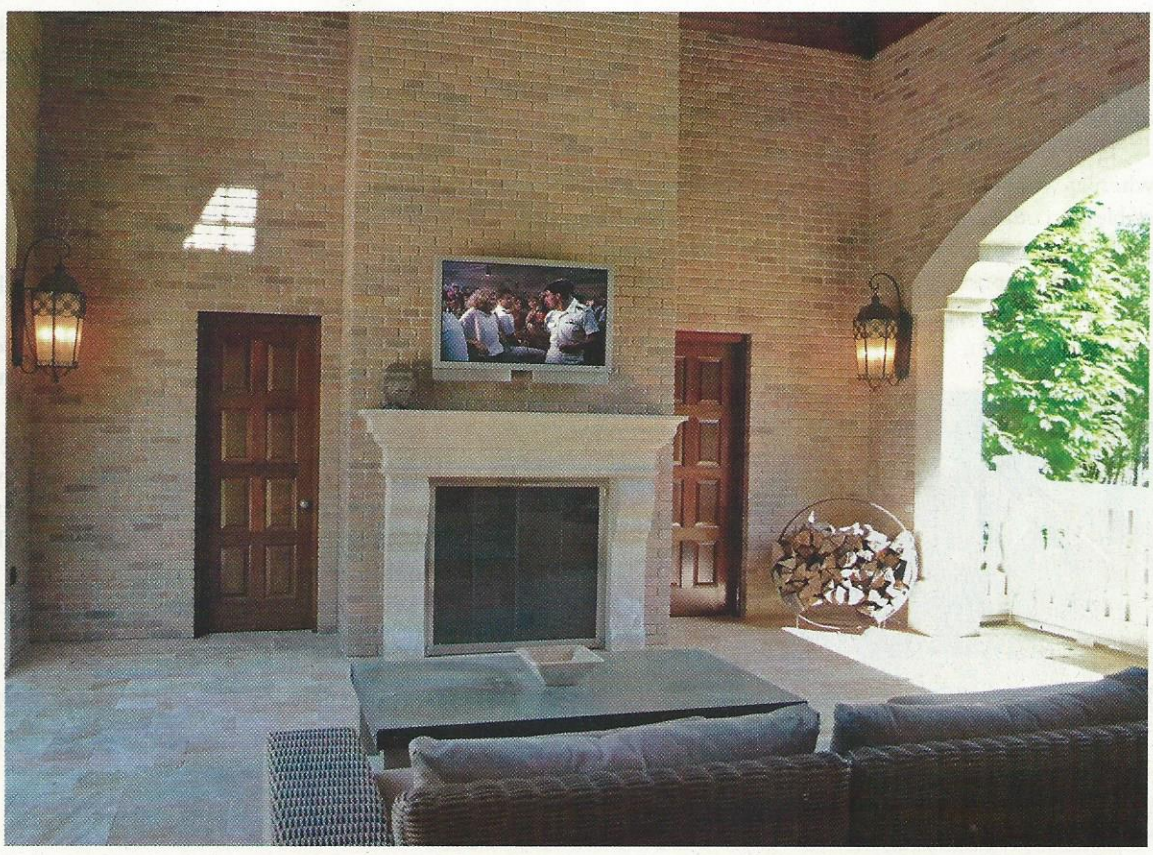


Photo by Melissa Napolitano

Keyhole gardens and other raised vegetable beds are also becoming more popular in the residential settings. "A keyhole garden combines the best attributes of a raised garden with a recycling center and a compost maker," Duke explained. "An overhead view of a keyhole garden looks like keyhole in a circular plot."

This "keyhole" allows the user easier access to the center area where it would be typical to deposit compostable scraps of vegetables and other green matter containing water. Micro-organisms go to work composting these greens and turn them into healthy soil. This composting ability of the garden and the fact that this style of gardening also requires less watering help make this a sustainable garden.

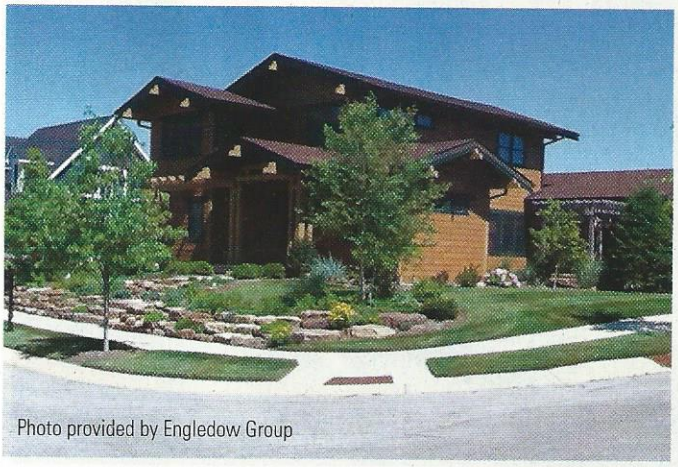


Photo provided by Engledow Group

Rain gardens are usually envisioned to be in the worst draining low spot of a property. "But when we want to plant these area we do want to replace the soil with some better draining soil media to help plants root better and to drain off excess storm water more quickly," he explained. "Our challenge here in the Midwest is having workable conditions on site. We average about one inch of rainfall per week, so having an area to be dry enough to access is often challenging."

While 2014's design trends are all about personalizing an outdoor living space to suit a client's personal preferences through entertainment systems and sustainable gardens, it's important to balance these design features with color and purposeful implementation.

More than ever, homeowners are craving outdoor living spaces that mirror their interior living areas. They will continue to look for new ways to enjoy the outdoors by bringing entertainment systems out of doors and incorporating color and sustainability into their landscapes.

With attentiveness to current trends and the customer's preferences the possibilities are endless.

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