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POND MAGIC



Presto-chango: The builder magically converted this unsightly poolscape (left) into a peaceful Japanese water garden (below).



A California pond builder converts an ordinary poolscape into an enchanted water garden.

By Joshua Keim Imagine spending the first week end in the backyard of you new home. All seems right with the world: fresh air, chirping birds and cars honking along the interstate behind the fence.

That wasn't exactly an ideal situation for a Los Altos, California homeowner, nor was the drab, abandoned pool that dominated her backyard. So she decided to convert the entire space into a secluded Japanese water garden, with a pond and stream as the central features.

"It's an interesting project because they had a large, ugly swimming pool that they had no use for," says Tim Gillett, owner of PondMagic in Santa Cruz, California. "[The client] was an enthusiastic gardener who wanted to transform the whole space."

Eliminating the noise nuisance would be like pulling a rabbit out of his hat. However, Gillett grew up around the royal gardens of England and had a few tricks up his sleeve.

Stage One

The three-week overhaul began with the demolition of the existing poolscape. The crew brought in a backhoe with a pointed breaker to dismantle the shell of the pool and surrounding patio concrete.

"The whole structure sort of folded in on itself, because it was a deep swimming pool", he says, "It was almost 8 feet in some places."

Approximately 12 yards of fill dirt was used during site preparation to cover the whole left by the demolition. The retaining wall also was ripped out, though its hillside would later serve as the site of the 30 foot stream that spills into the pond.

How'd they do that?

To Tim Gillett, owner of PondMagic in Santa Cruz, Calif., “a stream is the most creative part of a [water feature] project “ because it requires the most artistry and attention to detail. But how do you camouflage the hum of highway traffic with the sound of soft running water?

The first step, Gillett says, is to observe nature. “Water cuts down into the ground and carves a V-shaped channel. You need to remove your soil , so the stream sits on the ground rather than on top of it,” he says.

He points out that in nature “nothing is regular .” For example, a stream might leisurely meander until it dramatically snakes around in an S-shape, as it does in this project. However, the important thing to remember is that the water should ebb and flow, producing a mixture of sounds.

Gillett suggests setting large boulders intermittently along the middle of the stream to push the water in different directions. Sometimes, he says, “You want the water to squeeze as it rushes between stones.” Use varying depths along the river bed for water that “bubbles, swirls and turns.”

Incorporating multiple waterfalls also can enhance sound. For this project, the first fall near the top of the stream is approximately 15 inches high. Gillett then added two more 5 and 8 inch falls. The final one drops 3 feet into the pond. Just like this stream, some falls should sheet down over flat stones, while others spill around round boulders, “so it’s completely staggered and random,” Gillett says. – J.K.



Tim Gillett
Owner
PondMagic
Santa Cruz, Calif.

Stage two

During the next phase of construction, Gillett carved out the 14 x 20 foot pond, and the stream and wetland system, keeping on mind the laws of nature. “ It’s not like a pool where you want a smooth design,” Gillett says. “Here, you do whatever shape you want to try to make it look natural.”

Gillett incorporated four waterfalls of varying heights into the stream. Its alternating depths, he says were crucial to mimicking the contours and sounds of the realistic stream bed (see sidebar).

From the stream’s head, a wetland system feeds the entire water feature. The system uses three grades of rocks, starting with 6 then 2 inch river cobbles that are layered with ¾ inch gravel. Water drawn from the pond is pumped to the top of the wetland system, “percolating up through the stone and gravel into the stream, and flowing back down to the pond,” Gillett says. The point is to recirculate the water without exposing the return source.

Using 5 yards of sand, Gillett’s team proceeded to build marginal shelves 6 inches below the waterline and around the edge of the 2 ½ foot deep pond. Eventually, the shelves would provide a base for some of the water plants.

An EPDM rubber liner was used to create the water feature’s mold. “ It forms a surface and lays down over whatever contours you’ve created, making a good basis for a pond,” Gillett says.

Stage three

Like the wetland system, different grades of rock cover the liner to hide any telltale signs that the water feature is man-made. “Only rocks and gravel are showing when the plants and water are in,” Gillett says.

Three quarter inch gravel sits on the pond’s horizontal surfaces, such as the marginal shelves where the plants were later anchored. The face of the vertical walls and the central waterfall were built up with Sonoma field stones, sometimes called “moss rock”.

Water wash boulders accent the edges of the pond and stream, and boulders adorn the bluff of the main waterfall. The proper placement of the larger boulders captures the natural feel in the water feature’s design. “The boulders help with perspectives,” Gillett says. “They’re a natural focal point since they draw your eye.”

Stage four

With the water feature’s vessel completed, Gillett was ready to sow the garden’s seven species of waterborne plants. In this case, bunches of hornworts were anchored in the gravel to help balance the water.

“[These plants] use up nutrients in the water before the algae does and oxygenate the water,” Gillett says. Water hyacinths which sport bulbous leaves and fibrous root systems, float inside the wetland system.

Pennyworts creep around the edges and act as groundcover as they eventually work their way over the rocks. Water lilies bloom in the center of the pond to cut down the amount of sunlight hitting the hornworts. Gillett also added dwarf umbrellas to provide some contrast and distinctive shapes.

The final steps involved filling the pond and fine-tuning the circulation system to achieve the right sound. The client added little touches such as a wood bridge, landscape lanterns and Buddha statuette to enhance the gardens Japanese motif. The total price tag of the project was approximately \$40,000.

“The thing that stands out the most about the project is the total transformation of the space from an old, unused swimming pool into a rich lush water garden,” Gillett says. “The client can sit and enjoy privacy, peace and beauty.”