

LET'S PLAY POOL (or *Pool School* or *The Luxury of a Backyard Haven*)

Summertime, anytime swimming and pool planning...

Swimming season is upon us. Creating a new pool, or, perhaps, remodeling an older one is an interesting prospect for many in the region. With winters growing milder and summers getting hotter, a customized swimming haven right outside the door is becoming a trend for many Atlantans. And, summer is not the only time to consider the prospect of building a new pool or giving a new look to an existing one in need of repair. Fall, after the swimming season draws to a close and everyone out of the water, is a perfect season for an outdoor room renovation.

We enlisted Ken Whitlow, owner of Atlanta-based WaterColors, a pool, spa, and outdoor room company specializing in creating living dream spaces, to share his knowledge for Atlanta's long season of swimming, splashing, soaking, and sun-bathing. Whether the need is to install a new pool, refurbish an older one, or simply add trendy aesthetics, Whitlow has the scoop.

FIRST SPLASH

Even before the temperature outside reaches the famed "hot-lanta" highs, it is never too early to start thinking about preparing your pool for summer. If you are too hasty, you might even get stuck in waiting list limbo. Think early, because as soon as the weather starts to get just right, you can open your pool.

"It is kind of like planting in the garden," Whitlow says. "Open your pool after the chance of freezing is gone. This way, damage from too cold temperatures is not possible."

Damage can occur if the water left in the pool froze during the winter or if the pool was not drained correctly. Pipes often crack from freezing water. Many high-end pools have a freeze guard, which circulates the water during winter. It is a feature Whitlow highly recommends.

Do the basics. Take off the cover, if you have one. Remove all leaves and debris from the pool. If you missed the early boat this season, it is never too late to clean up in and around a pool.

Whitlow advises always start by taking out the filter's cartridges, backwashing the sand filter, or putting new media in the filter. Make sure the filter is clean and ready for use. Activate the filter, and check the pressure on the filter gauge.

Then it is time to check the pool's basic chemistry. This includes chlorine, PH, calcium hardness, and total alkalinity. Regularity and balance are essential for clean and safe pool usage. If needed, most pool supply specialists can look at a sample of your water – with the help of a computer program – and point you in the right direction.

"Once you achieve chemical balance, there is typically little to change for the rest of the summer unless you lose a lot of water," says Whitlow. "The only thing that will usually change weekly is the PH level. In addition, it is important to remember a daily infusion of chlorine."

BE A POOL DETECTIVE

After you have uncovered and treated your pool, it is time to look for tell tale signs of surface damage. It is normal to find some cracks in the pool's surface after the winter season, and they can be repaired without too difficult an effort. Having a pool resurfaced is less expensive than buying a brand new pool, and the latest resurfacing technologies make it possible to elongate a pool's life. Refurbishing your pool at the right time helps stop a small problem from becoming something bigger. It is critical to pay attention to pool maintenance at the beginning of each warm season to avoid unnecessary costs later.

With gunite pools, the most commonly used concrete pool type, it is a smart idea to check and make sure no tiles have loosened or even completely fallen off the pool's edge. This sometimes happens during the freeze / thaw cycle of winter. They will need to be replaced to avoid sharp points or edges that can catch fingers and toes.

If the PH gets too high or low, it can eat away at the bottom of the pool. "Plaster-bottom pools react to the acid in low PH like Alka Seltzer in a glass, not a good thing," says Whitlow.

Your pool may have been smooth when you closed it the previous fall, but water can get aggressive. Unbalanced PH and alkalinity draw out the calcium from the pool's surface and forms on the floor and walls of the interior. To assess if this is the case with your pool, check for white, sandy-like build up on the pool's floor. To the touch, the pool's surface will feel like sandpaper. This is the last thing you want rubbing against your feet when trying to relax in the water. This type of damage makes it very difficult to clean the pool. It absorbs stains from leaves, and debris hides easily in the rough surface. If you have seen this type of stain and attempted to scrub away at it with a brush, your efforts were probably futile. At this point, you know it is time to resurface the pool.

Another indication resurfacing is needed is the augmentation of little round circles – which actually resemble ringworm – on the bottom of the pool. "These circles," Whitlow points out, "are known as spot etching, meaning the pool has aggressive water." In short, the over-performing or unbalanced water is virtually drawing out the chemistry make-up of the surface, and does so in the shape of a circle. In gunite pools, this can become such a problem that the concrete shows through the surface. This means the water has eaten all of the finish coating off of the bottom, and is a sure sign indicating you need to have your pool replastered in order to reseal its interior.

Also, keep an eye out for cracks. All plaster cracks are not a bad thing; some amount of cracking is to be expected as a natural drying characteristic of gunite pools with regular plaster surfaces. However, it is important to examine any cracks to determine if they are open and exposing the pool's interior. Whitlow equates the cracks to veins on your arm. They may be visible but not open. No problem there.

If you are able to see a crack when the pool is full of clean clear water, it is probably an open crack, an area that has been opened or loosened. "If an open crack is found, the pool should be drained and the crack fixed," offers Whitlow. "This is true even if you do not wish to replaster the entire pool, because the aggressive water causing the issue will get into the shell and lead to even more erosion problems."

TRY A NEW LOOK

What if your pool surface is just fine, but the pool area itself looks more 1986 than 2006? A noticeable revamp, be it edging, coping, or stonework, breathes new life into dated pools.

One of WaterColors' projects, the pool at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Decorators' Show House, recently went through a style change. Whitlow and company updated the pool area by replacing outdated tile and chipped brick coping, and then added a fashionable blue stone deck. This 23-foot by 46-foot, Grecian-shaped pool now boasts a restful spa on one end and a flowing fountain on the other. It is not new, but it looks as if it is.

"The style of a pool is like a house," Whitlow says. "You can drive through neighborhoods in Atlanta, and you are able to tell the approximate age of the houses by their details." In the same way, pools that were designed and built a decade or more ago have a defined appearance of being older and unstylish. The color of a pool's tile indicates its age as well. Several years ago, it was considered quite the rage to use brown and dark red tile and other darkish hardscape materials. Then, in more recent years, pool colors changed to bright blue, green, and white plaster with brick coping."

Today's trends call for a natural look and feel. Many contemporary pools verge on looking like a small pond in the backyard, which provides a more virtual landscape design. WaterColors helps its clientele choose the right mix of materials and creates stonework around pools to give them the appearance of nature. The choices are wide, including exotic stones from India and the Himalayan Mountains that are surprisingly comparable in price to domestic stones. Another favorite pool edging is that of flat sandstones which derive locally.

"Stone is ageless," Whitlow says. "Brick trends change in color and design, but stone used for pools remains the same. Homeowners' desire to use stone in the creation of their pools and decks is the hottest trend in outdoor rooms to date."

Whitlow remembers 20 years ago when deep pools were the must-have style, featuring high diving boards and slides plummeting in steep inclines. But, according to Whitlow, studies have found that swimmers who have diving pools – approximately 8-feet or more in the deepest section – spend 80 percent of their time in the shallow end.

Therefore, popular among homeowners are center-deep pools, ones that are three- to four-feet deep on both ends but drop to five- or six-feet deep in the middle. Many of Whitlow's clients opt for pools featuring a swim shelf. This is a portion of the pool that has about 10-inches of water, perfect for emerging a low-based lounge chair and basking in the sun. Other in-vogue pool picks include additions like grottoes, caves, and spas attached to the pool itself.

Pools today are often designed in an outdoor room environment and become an extension of the house. The surroundings become another living area where outdoor amenities like appliance-filled kitchens, granite wet bars, and cushy furniture feel right at home – as much as they do inside the house. Outdoor fireplace installations, where wet and chilly guests are able to warm-up next to a crackling hearth, are ultra trendy. Whitlow expects to install many this season.

PICK A POOL, ANY POOL; HOW TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

Making the decision to install a pool can be daunting. But, it does not have to be an unpleasant task. A new pool is something in which the whole family can participate. Where do you start? First, you have to pick the style that is best suited for the use of the pool.

Each member of the household should consider, Whitlow suggests, “What will be the main purpose of the pool?” Think carefully about the household make-up? Some desire a pool for exercise, others for entertaining. Still others prefer a combination of both. Pool installation pros like WaterColors can help find a fit, be it a pool made for diving or one for nothing more than relaxation. The options are numerous, and should be contemplated and chosen in advance.

If tiny tots or new swimmers are in the family, Whitlow says wide steps and a swim shelf are a necessity. They both serve as safe havens for those learning how to swim. When a young swimmer is comfortable, the large steps or shelf offer a place from which to venture and try a stroke or two.

There are three types of in-ground pools including gunite, fiberglass, and vinyl. Each has its own share of pros and cons.

Gunite, the most pricey of the three, ranges from \$25,000 to \$250,000, and beyond. The sky is the limit with these pools. They are the most durable and are more apt to have the natural trendy look.

“15-year-old gunite pools, in many cases, look the same as they did the day they were installed. They are timeless,” says Whitlow.

Gunite basically refers to the application of the concrete. New pool owners can choose from any shape they can imagine, even the state of Georgia in one case, Whitlow recalls with a smile. The pool development team begins by digging a hole in the planned shape. They lay and align the plumbing, and then they install rebar throughout the area. A water-infused mix of sand and cement is then sprayed all over the surface. It is just like a sand castle at the beach, and portions can be shaped into just about anything, including caves, waterfalls, or even sitting areas with small cocktail tables.

The price of fiberglass pools lands in the middle of the range, with an average cost of \$35,000. Customers choose from pre-designed shapes built by manufacturers. Most manufacturers have 10 to 12 designs and shapes from which to pick. Fiberglass pools offer solid surface finishes, and it is possible to upgrade features such as decorative waterline tile, stone edging, and other amenities common in the gunite pools.

In this case, however, there are shape and size limitations. Since the pool’s shell is delivered by a truck, fiberglass pools cannot be any wider than 16-feet. The largest fiberglass pool available is 16 by 42-feet long. Though, if landscape space is an issue, as it is with so many neighborhood lots, the sizes of fiberglass pools are fine.

Vinyl pools are often the choice of budget-minded homeowners. Most are in the \$20,000 range. The least expensive vinyl pool is a rectangular-shaped stock model. While vinyl is a less expensive means to achieving a pool, there are also some significant

considerations. These pools potentially require more repairs because the lining is soft and can tear or rip. This means keep your glassware inside. Replacing the vinyl in its entirety should also be expected at some point, and can be an unwanted issue, in that; replacement liners often are not cut and fitted to exact pool dimensions.

To make a vinyl pool more eye-pleasing and similar-looking to its gunite and fiberglass counterparts, stone coping can be placed around the edges. But, for the cost of making a vinyl pool look somewhat more like the fiberglass or gunite options, Whitlow recommends considering at least a basic fiberglass pool.

Unlike a gunite pool, a spa addition to a vinyl pool is more costly. This is simply because vinyl pools are not designed to accommodate spas. Thus, as Whitlow cautions, it is always good for a homeowner to think through all aspects of a pool project and explore budget possibilities from the onset.

NO MATTER WHAT, JUST POOL IT

Whether you have an older pool in need of a makeover, or have your sights set on a new glamorous pool, pool house, and outdoor kitchen, there are options aplenty to go with your taste and budget. Before you end up wistfully gazing over the fence at your neighbor's sparkling pool, find a reputable pool expert like WaterColors and dive into your dream.

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