



Wet and wild

If you want a swimming pool in your garden, it doesn't have to be a garish, turquoise rectangle. **Stephen Venables** discovers a natural, plant-filled alternative

IT HASN'T been much of a summer for swimming-pool owners. But at Baytons Farm, Tish Rickard took her first dip three weeks ago, her 11-year-old son, Tom, has been swimming every day since April and her older son, Frank, took his inaugural plunge in March. This could just be temporary enthusiasm for a brand-new pool, except that theirs is not your standard turquoise rectangle, plonked incongruously in the English countryside. No - they dive into something which looks more like a pond, with green planted edges, and the occasional water boatman paddling by. They are the proud owners of Britain's first Biotops natural swimming pool.

The quest for the pool started two years ago, when Tish and her husband, Tim, were wondering what to do with the existing, rather murky farm pond in their five-acre garden. Browsing for ideas in Stroud's Green Shop they came across a photo of a stunning water feature in Austria - pond,

water garden and swimming pool all rolled into one. The shop owners then put them in touch with an environmental landscape architect, Michael Littlewood, who was already exploring the idea of natural, chlorine-free swimming pools. As with most things environmental, Britain lagged far behind the Continent, and Littlewood had to go to Austria, Germany and Switzerland to study the technology. Nearly all the existing pools were built by the Austrian company Biotops, so he decided to act as their agent in Britain, persuading the Rickards to become the first British clients.

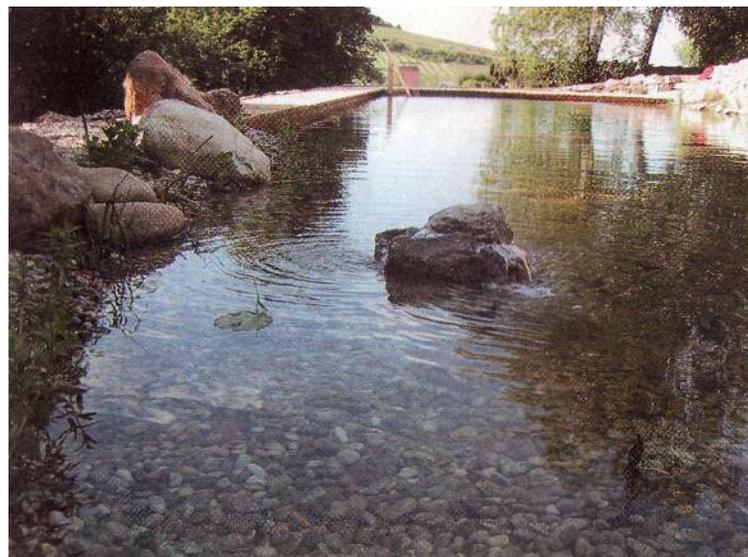
It soon became obvious that the old pond at Baytons Farm, with all the run-off from the surrounding land, could not realistically be adapted. The Biotops natural pool is a sealed ecosystem, relying on plants, pumped air and water circulation to sustain a neutral pH balance. Better for the Rickards to start afresh with a new pool. As Tish explained when I went to see the

finished pool last week: "We had an area of the garden which was just waiting for something to happen. Tim cut down a scrappy old hedge and then we could see through to the potential."

We were sitting in the kitchen of their timber-framed brick house in the Vale of Yeadon, a forgotten corner of Gloucestershire far from the groomed dry-stone walls and theme-park manor houses of the Cotswolds. From this bucolic retreat they run a television production company, but also find time for the garden. Tim pointed out all the young oak, alder, ash and hornbeam he has planted since they moved here 11 years ago. And the apple orchard. And the morello cherry trained on the wall of the old cider press. And a glorious clump of cardoons presiding over the kitchen garden. A shiny Hockney-style pool might look fine in California, but here it would stick out like a sore thumb. We went outside to have a look at the natural alternative.

Rough-cut grass merges into the shallow pool edge, where water lilies, arums, yellow flags, water mint and other aquatic plants filter the water in the "regeneration zone". This shallow margin equals in area the much deeper swimming zone, separated from it by a larch-wood plinth about four inches beneath the surface. Cantilevered over the plinth in one corner is an area of decking, also in larch, also untreated to avoid any toxins leaching into water. The docking conceals a neat electric pump which keeps the water circulating. Under another small hatch concealing the outlet, Tim proudly showed me water snails caught in the sieve-like skimmer which saves wildlife from being sucked to a horrible death.

I asked whether there had been any teething problems with the pool and Tish admitted that they had been worried by a build-up of algae in the spring. She sent a sample off to the Centre for Aquatic Plant



WEEKEND WORK ANNA PAVORD

Cut down the flowered stems of enthusiastic self-seeders such as aquilegia, sweet rocket and Jacob's ladder. A twist of wire around the stems of specific foxgloves and opium poppies, while they still have a remnant of colour in them, will help remind you which spikes you want to keep for future self seeding.

You could also start a new colony of foxgloves from seed. The ground is well soaked at the moment and you can either sow seed in a straight row outside or broadcast them over the patch you want to fill. Either way you will have to thin out or transplant seedlings to allow young plants room to develop. 'Excelsior Hybrid Mixed' (Thompson & Morgan £1.29) is a handsome foxglove, with flowers all the way round its stem, showier than the wild type which has flowers only on one side. Foxgloves do best in damp, cool ground. They are excellent in shade.

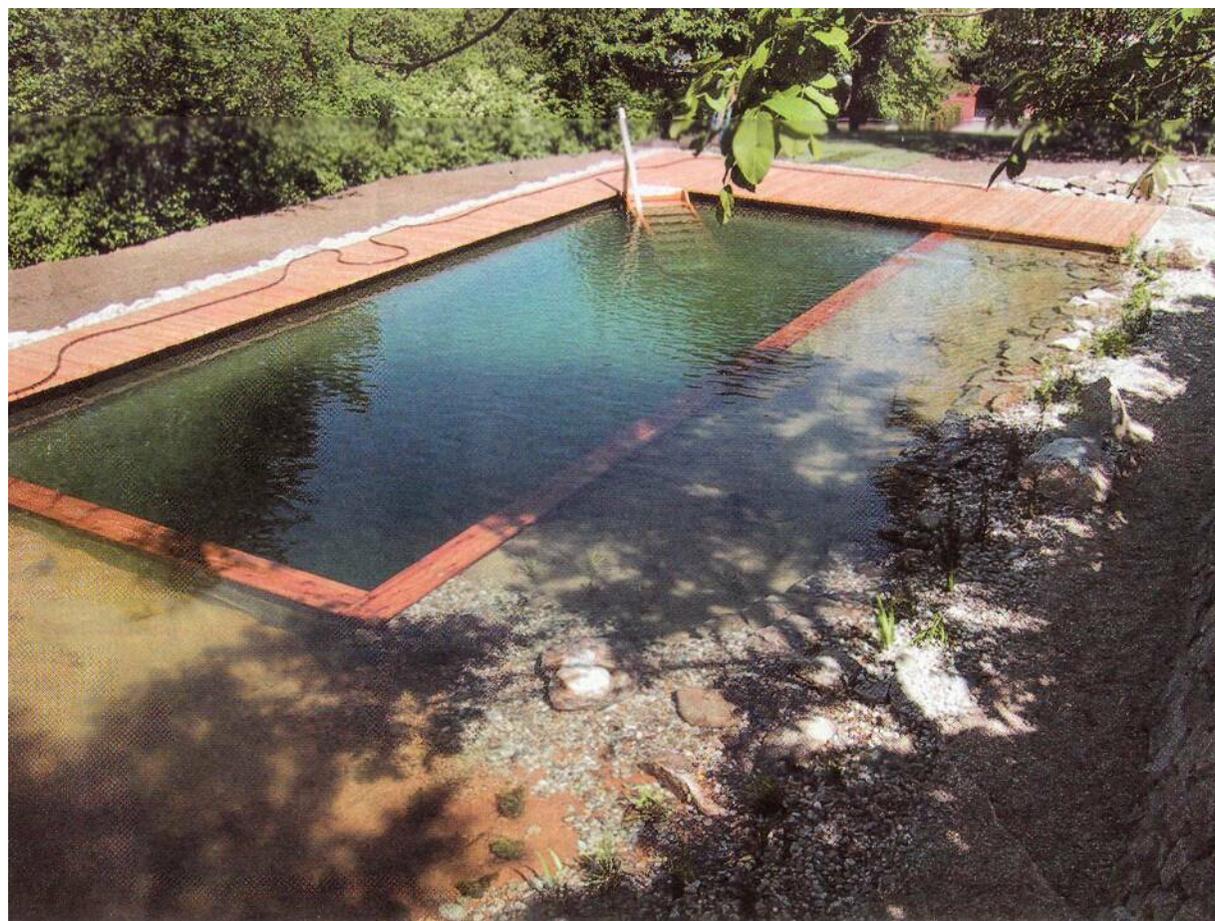
* Dead head roses to encourage further flowering. Make the cut at the first proper bud down the stem below the flower head.

* Keep picking sweet peas. They will soon stop flowering if they are allowed to go to seed. I am growing mine up wigwams again this year. Experimenting with growing them cordon-style was interesting, and produced flowers with wonderfully long stems, but the general effect was not as pretty as the wigwams.

* This year most of the sweet peas are from seed I've been saving for years. The flowers are small, deep pink and purple and have a stronger scent than any other sweet pea I know. But I've added 'Wiltshire Ripple' (Thompson & Morgan £1.79), which produces lovely smudgy flowers, white veined with blackcurrant juice, and with a wonderful smell. The darkest of this year's crop is 'Black Knight' (Mr Fothergill £1.45), one of the old Grandiflora type of sweet peas, bred by Henry Eckford in 1898.

* Transplant cabbages and broccoli from seed beds to their final positions.
* Take cuttings of garden pinks. Choose shoots about 3in long and stick them round the edge of pots which you have filled with a sandy mixture of soil.

* Take cuttings of the indoor Begonia rex. The proper way is to slit the veins under a leaf and lay it flat on the soil, weighted down with pebbles. Small new plants grow from the cuts. I prune mine by cutting out one or two of the longest and most impossible stems each year. If you take the top 6in of each of these stems and pot them up singly in compost, they, too, will grow into new plants.



Management and was reassured that they were harmless and would die down after May, which they did. "In any case," she insisted, "this is a living organism and it's going to take time to settle down."

Pumped air helps increase carbon dioxide to keep the pH at an ideal level - just below neutral - and by next summer all the beneficial filtering plants should be clumping up nicely in the regeneration zone. As for the swimming, "it's so lovely to have that perspective, looking out through the plants. And there's no chlorine stinging your eyes and leaving a horrible film on your skin. We all love it".

Maintenance requirements seem to be attractively low. The Rickards netted the pool during late autumn to keep out falling leaves and they are recommended to give the main swimming area a vacuum clean each March. For the rest of the summer the pool just accumulates a small amount of natural sediment, like any river. However, unlike

most rivers, it is sealed off from nitrates and other pollutants - a chemical-free zone where people and wildlife can swim happily side by side. At the moment Michael Littlewood has one contractor in Britain licensed to build Biotops pools, but he is looking for others. Close to the Rickards, two pools linked by a waterfall are planned for a garden in Ross-on-Wye. Another pool has just been completed in Cambridgeshire. As for Austria and Switzerland, they have hundreds in every shape and size, from exclusive alpine retreats to large, natural pools open to the public. *

Biotops natural pools cost about £260 per square metre - £18,000 for a typical family-sized pool. This includes all construction work, machinery and materials, plus planting of the regeneration zone. All enquiries to Michael Littlewood, telephone and fax: 01626 852866, e-mail michael@ecodesign.freeserve.co.uk.

TAKING THE PLUNGE
Facing page: the Rickards' Biotops pool, the first of its kind to be built in Britain. This page: detail from same pool and one from Austria, where the natural swimming pool is extremely popular, both for public use and in private gardens