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Photo by Nelson French.

COOL WATER

Streams, falls and fountains in home settings.

by **Marylene Vestergom**

What is it about the sound of cascading water planted in the middle of our city squares that immediately transports us away from the oppressive urban environment? In a split second, the sound of water has a calming effect. Visually, it seduces us, but it really is the sound that immediately conjures up memories. It's not surprising to learn that today's time-starved urban dwellers are quickly realizing that their backyard can become a private oasis with the addition of a water feature.

"People are now thinking on a much grander scale about how they can incorporate water into the garden," says Janet Rosenberg, of Janet Rosenberg + Associates Landscape Architects + Urban Designers. "The tastes and desires of my clients are much more sensual than they used to be, in terms of understanding the layers and the experiences their gardens can provide, whether it's fragrance, colour, texture or water. People are very aware of these elements both inside and outside of their homes."

Rosenberg points out that today's water features have come a long way from the precast, three-tiered fountains embedded in rockery stones; they are now much more substantial and significant. Some

are integrated into their surroundings, while others provide a naturally balanced ecosystem, or transform lonely swimming pools into reflecting ponds. But specific form and style aside, in general, says Rosenberg, "Water in gardens can elevate the experience of everyday contemporary life."

Today, landscape architects are working with ecologists and engineers to integrate water into ecologically functional designs that also delight the senses. The installation *Sfumato* at the International Flora Montréal 2006 garden show highlighted how Rosenberg's firm was able to incorporate a combination of aquatic plants, such as water lilies, water lettuce and duckweed, to create balanced ecologies that minimize the need for chemical or mechanical intervention. And then there's the associated tranquility: "One of the main reasons people generally like to add a water feature is because of the white noise, the neutralizing of the local ambient sounds," says Joel Loblaw of Toronto's Earth Inc. Designed Landscapes. "It's just so peaceful. It reminds or transports people to different places that they've been to in their life. Nature always inspires."



Above: *Sfumato* installation at the International Flora Montréal 2006 garden show. Top right: Water spills from a linear limestone trough. Bottom right: Waterfall into infinity pool. Opening page: Hand-carved Indiana stone bowl fountain designed by Janet Rosenberg + Associates Landscape Architects + Urban Designers.

Photo by Gary L'Huissier.

Photo by Melissa Francis.

Photo by Damiana Liu.

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Perhaps the first step in understanding the importance of a water feature is appreciating the fact that your garden is a continuation of your home. “It is not a separate room,” says Loblaw. “By threading the flow from the interior of your home to the next space, the garden, you can quickly extend your living area, creating intrigue and an element of exploration.” In adding a water feature, whether it’s close to the entrance of the garden or further back behind an arbour, you build an aspect of discovery, which leaves your guests wondering where that wonderful water sound is coming from. Designing your garden with a water feature is no different than creating the rooms inside your house.

Like any design sensibilities, inspirations are varied. For instance, Loblaw says paying close attention to the architecture of the home and the existing layout of the landscape is key to a successful and appealing garden water feature. “You don’t want to fight the surroundings too much if you can help it. We take our cues from our clients by identifying their inspiration and rationale behind wanting a water feature. Having a clear understanding really provides a solid base for the project. Perhaps the client is trying to capture

something they saw and experienced while on a vacation to Mexico or Hawaii. Our job is then to take that feeling and look, and create something that will be conducive to our climate.”

How it’s introduced, and incorporated into the existing landscape, requires careful planning and consideration, says Loblaw. “Water features should be timeless, especially since they are a fairly large investment.” He says homeowners should take care not to introduce anything that can be dated. If any sort of trend exists, it would be in finding ways in which water features can transform and work with existing pool structures.

A case study of this could be Earth Inc.’s creation of a negative-edge, or infinity, pool for a homeowner on Lake Simcoe, a feature that took the basic swimming pool setting to a whole new level. “It is a great example of a grandiose water feature that blends two bodies of water together,” says Loblaw. “It is made up of two distinct parts. First, there is a waterfall that goes into the pool, and secondly, the pool itself flows over the negative edge. The negative-edge pool creates a seamless line between the edge of the pool and a large body of water that’s below it; in this case it’s Lake Simcoe.” The



Earth Inc.'s negative-edge pool.

Photo by Brenda Liu

“Water on its own is an architectural detail that doesn’t need a lot of propping. It should present nature at its best.”

seamless edge is made of clear, polished, tempered glass, which creates the feeling of infinity at the point where the pool ends and the lake below begins. The long and seamless piece of glass at the edge of the waterfall is smooth, so you don’t get the sense that it’s overflowing when you’re in it—it creates the perfect horizon line. The water falls as a sheet pattern into the pool, and when the wind blows on it, it creates an attractive ripple effect.

And this type of modification isn’t limited to pools. “My favourite water feature is one we created to look like a water trough but was really a custom hot tub for six people,” Rosenberg says of one of her company’s projects. When it’s not operating as a hot tub, there’s a stainless-steel spout that recycles the water. It’s a great example of how a structure like a hot tub can perform double duty—that is, it can still be used as a hot tub, but it can be easily integrated into the garden setting by making it part of a water feature. With the addition of the spout, it looks like a beautiful reflecting pool with water flowing into it.

This exemplifies one of the advantages of working with water features: they’re incredibly customizable and versatile. That said, there should be a balance between the water that is being introduced, the gardening material that will be used to frame the feature and, most importantly, the structural materials employed to create the water feature. “Water on its own is an architectural detail that doesn’t need a lot of propping,” Loblaw says. “It should present nature at its best.”

Water features aren’t just for homeowners. Condo dwellers with terraces have found that they provide a much-needed noise barrier in the middle of the city, plus a natural cooling effect. Loblaw

also advocates the unexpected “wow” factor: “Water features will always grab people’s eye because although it’s dynamic enough to have a garden on the terrace, adding a water feature makes the terrace that much more impressive. It’s something that would be totally unexpected.”

Inspired by the scenic lakeside setting of Toronto’s waterfront, Rosenberg designed a water feature for a penthouse setting that complements and harmonizes the natural elements of wind, sunlight and water. Water flows soothingly into a hand-carved Indiana stone bowl fountain and reflects light fragments onto a steel wall. A stone water trough anchors this contemporary design and provides respite from the noise of the nearby freeway.

Urban, commercial and public spaces also allow for water-feature opportunities, although on a larger scale. In this arena, landscape architects deal with static and harsh environments lacking the lushness of plants, trees, shrubbery or ornamental grasses that are found in almost any backyard setting. Adding an architectural element that includes water often brings these spaces to life. The outcome? A calming effect that is juxtaposed with the surrounding concrete jungle, a peaceful pool or rippling rivulet providing tranquility next to a busy city street or tall office building.

And perhaps it is this stark contrast, between an incessantly busy lifestyle and a few moments, quiet and relaxing, watching a small pool fill from a trickling stream, that is making water features increasingly popular. On the surface, they create natural sound barriers and are beautiful to look at. But it is also the necessary, almost meditative, shift that occurs when you stop to reflect on a lightly splashing waterfall. Tranquility indeed. ●