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THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH - Your Space

It's not too late to install a pool for summer but you need to get a move on, writes Chris Maher.

AS the first scent of jasmine hits the spring air, thoughts turn to outdoor activities such as swimming in your own backyard pool.

But it's ironic that many people only think of installing a pool once the weather warms up – leaving precious little time to plan, get approval and build it before summer switches off again.

For a start, most councils take at least three months to approve a development application, despite the downturn in the building industry.

"It depends on the council you're in," says Manfred Wiesemes, president of the Swimming Pool and Spa Association. "Some councils take a hell of a lot longer. For most you're looking at a minimum of three months, which is longer than it used to be, though it's a little bit quicker with some of the more regional councils, like Hawkesbury and even Baulkham Hills."

Because it takes six to eight weeks to actually build a pool, it's already too late in many council areas to get a pool in by Christmas. But if you begin planning today, you could still get some summer swimming in, as the warm weather can extend well into March, and if you install solar heating, you could swim until the end of April.

Wiesemes says one way to speed up the planning process is to make sure the pool is compliant from the outset. That is, it should measure 40sq m or less; be on a level site and meet all basic requirements, such as distance from boundaries.

GET A FLYING START

THERE is also hope on the horizon for speedier approvals, as the Department of Planning is looking at introducing a code based system before the end of the year, which could see approvals for compliant projects fast-tracked to just 10 days.

As well as meeting council regulations, swimming pools over 40,000 litres have to comply with BASIX, the NSW Government's Building Sustainability Index, to reduce energy consumption for new dwellings and additions, including pools. Conditions include installing a pump timer, pool cover or shading and a rainwater tank for topping up the pool. Pools can actually be designed and built to go even further than the government requirements, saving pool owners money while reducing the impact on the environment.

FROM BLUE TO GREEN

THE recently held SPLASH! Environmental Pool Awards showcased a number of pools from around Australia and New Zealand that use very little water or energy. In fact, the winning residential pool, built on the NSW Central Coast, uses no mains power or mains water.

The pool was designed, together with the home, by James Cooper, of Sanctum Design, for home builder Claron Property Group. The pool was built by Sydney pool builder Aquastone and the landscaping, which includes drought-tolerant plants, was by Michael Cook Landscape Architects.

Features include an automatic slatted pool cover, highly effective in reducing water loss through evaporation – the most common way swimming pools lose water. When pools lose water, they also lose energy and chemicals, because any new water introduced to the pool has to be chemically treated and – if it is a heated pool – reheated. The cover will even help store the natural heat from the sun that has warmed the water during the day. The solid glass fence also helps reduce evaporation.

One of the key features of this pool is its water storage capacity – a giant 200,000 litre reservoir, which can store 133 per cent of the pool volume from rainwater harvesting and bore water.

The pool equipment is run entirely on solar-generated power, and other features further increase its energy efficiency. These include heating the pool via a heat pump, a relatively new technology that acts like a super-efficient reverse-cycle air-conditioner, converting latent heat in the atmosphere into warm pool water, and consuming only a few kilowatts of power in the process. It is second only to solar pool heating as the most environmentally friendly way to heat a pool. Also, the plumbing was designed to minimise 90-degree angles, which means the pump doesn't have to work as hard to move the water around.

Under BASIX, pool pumps must have a timer feature, but this pool goes one step further by having the timer linked to a CBus home automation system. One of the benefits of having pump timers is they can be used during off-peak hours, saving money and reducing demand on the power grid. For this to be effective, the pump should be housed in a soundproof enclosure so it doesn't disturb the neighbours. This pool's equipment is actually housed in a double brick room, even though the issue is not so great in this instance as the pool rarely draws power from the grid.

Other ideas to come from the awards were the use of a cyclonic pre-filter to minimise water loss from filter backwashing, and a chemical system which uses magnesium salts instead of sodium, meaning the backwash water can be re-used to water gardens in council areas that allow this.

When pools are designed as part of a new home or addition, it is easier to incorporate them into the homeowner's lifestyle.

LIFESTYLE CHOICE

THE second pool featured here, in Rozelle, was built as part of a house extension and renovation, complete with solar heating and a wind-minimising glass fence. But while being eco-friendly was an important consideration, the main aims were to provide a great lifestyle for the family while maximising every available millimetre of the precious inner-city garden.

The entire project included restoring the traditional front of the cottage, adding a modern two-storey wing and the staged construction of the pool and landscaping.

A major feature is the removable back wall, made possible by folding glass doors. Architect Wayne McPhee, of McPhee Partners, describes the result as like the Tardis, Dr Who's "bigger than you think" time machine.

"You open the back of the kitchen/dining/living room up, and you're met with a bigger vista than you'd normally have in an inner-west location like this," he says. The pool is clearly visible behind the glass fence, further extending the eyeline. It enables the family to spend summer at the back of the home, enjoying a great indoor/ outdoor lifestyle. "The pool was especially seen as a place where the kids could get their swimming training, so they'd grow up water-savvy," McPhee says.

LAPS OF LUXURY

WHILE it's common to think of creating pools for kids, architect Emile Jansen designed the third featured pool, in Newport on the northern beaches, for an entirely different demographic – a retired pilot who wanted therapeutic exercise in warm water.

The design takes the indoor/outdoor concept even further by creating a hybrid pool – the lap section stretches outside to the terrace, while the splash area (designed with grandkids in mind) is away from the weather.

Being indoor, this pool is also eco-friendly: it is heated by gas, but heat loss is minimal because it is largely inside. The design includes rainwater storage tanks totalling 36,000 litres. Originally, the idea was to have a weir spilling water from the pool down the stone blade at the front of the home into a balance tank, but that plan was abandoned because it would mean excessive evaporation.

"I like my ideas to make homes for older people accessible so they don't have to move out as they get older," says Jansen. "Even to the point of bullying owners to put lifts in, which are not as expensive as they used to be. This home has a lift which goes through all three floors. It cost \$42,000 but that's money well spent if you don't have to move later."

As well, the bathrooms and kitchens are wheelchair-accessible. "I try desperately hard not to let it look like an old people's home," he says. "The grab rails are not there, but they can be quickly installed if needed."

The pool faces the water, so while the owner enjoys his therapeutic exercise, he can also appreciate the view.

"The pool is part of the house" says Jansen. "We wanted it to look perfectly in place; we didn't want it to look like a pool in a gymnasium."