

A bigger splash

You don't need a huge garden or fancy pond to enjoy a water feature, says **Anna Pavord**
Photographs by **Andrew Hassan**



IN THE heat of summer, you need the cooling promise of water in a garden. You can be seduced by its sparkle in the brilliant light. You can be calmed by the sound of water rippling back into itself from simple jets or fountains. Italy in Islington. It can be done.

You will probably need help. Water has to stay where it is put and I wouldn't be any happier fiddling around with its provision in the garden than I would be sorting out the plumbing in the house. I'm thinking here of something more ambitious (and satisfying) than a free-form, pre-moulded amoeba pool of the type you find in garden centres.

A water feature may be no more than a large sink or stone trough, filled with rounded pebbles and shells with a circulating pump cunningly hidden below. The water bubbles up through a pipe in the centre of the trough and spills out over the stones to return to the pump below. Such a feature is soothing, relatively cheap and simple to set up and provides a final resting place for the flotsam that flows home as inevitably as the tide from any visit to the beach.

Stylistically, this is the garden equivalent of the beige suit. It will go anywhere. It can sit on a wooden deck five storeys above ground or be tucked under a wall in a basement well. It is as happy in a Japanese garden as it is in a Mediterranean one. Once you get into the territory of lion's masks and fake lead troughs, you need more particular props: box hedges, lilies, a garden made with nostalgia in mind.

A lion's mask (or any other kind of water spout) will need to be fixed against something solid, so this kind of water feature is likely to be tucked against a wall, the water falling

from the lion's mouth into a trough below. The water will make more of a splashing noise than the gently bubbling pebble fountain, but the water itself can be recycled in just the same way.

If you want a proper pool, your gardening life will become more complicated and more expensive. A pool can't be dropped into place as easily as a lion's mask spout. It needs to link in with the overall plan of the garden. You may want it sited so that you can see it from inside the house. You may want it next to a sitting-out area. If you have a conservatory tacked onto the back of the house, you could do something tricky and have half the pool inside the conservatory, half outside.

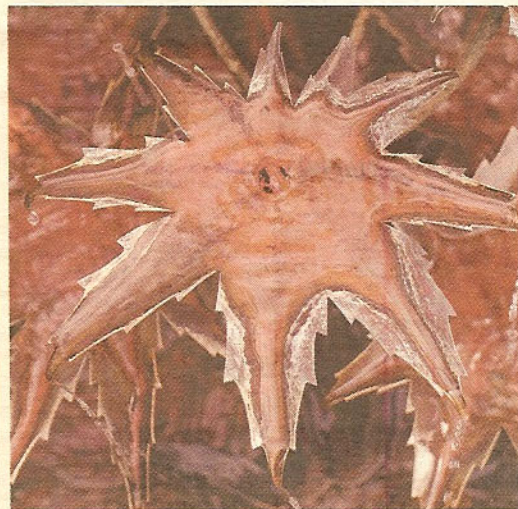
The position of the pool will be affected by the way you decide to install it: dug out so that the water is at ground level, or built up so you avoid the mess and expense of excavating. There are advantages in both methods, but with both it is the finish that is important.

There may be practical reasons why digging out is not an option. Many town houses have no rear access: there is no way you can get even a mini-digger into place and all earth has to be carted out through the hall. But a built-up pool will only work if, in a visual sense, it is properly anchored to the ground and the rest of its surroundings.

A box hedge planted round the retaining wall of the pool will do this and give the charming effect (provided you design the lip of the pool with a light hand) that the water itself is held only in a bowl of box. Or you can make a virtue of the raised retaining wall round a pool and treat it as a garden seat, extending the lip with wooden slats. You could render the wall (which will probably be built with a material you'd rather not look at) and plant it with ivy.

The shape of a pool matters too: the simpler the better. In the long narrow configuration of a typical town garden, a circular pool, set centrally, will break up the space and work profitably against the geometry. If you have brick paths or a brick patio, then the surround of the pool (if there is to be one) should be brick too. The smaller the garden, the less different materials you should use in it. The pool needn't be planted, but I'd still have a jet or a fountain installed, even if it is rarely jetted. The noise of water is an important reason for having a feature in the first place.

But it's not easy to find water features that are good to look at and that are made on the right scale for smallish gardens. Humphrey Bowden specialises in fountains, all inspired by the shapes of plants such as globe artichoke, hart's tongue fern, willow, fan palm, passion flower, castor oil plant, water lily,



“The noise of the water is an important reason for having a feature in the first place”



banana palm. He spent the first part of his life in industry, working in product design and development. "But I got fed up with that, moved to a smaller house and started up as a fountain maker," he says.

His fountains are made from copper, which turns from orange-brown to a soft grey-green as it ages. His workshop is a shed in the garden, where he laboriously cuts shapes from sheets of metal and hammers them out over variously carved blocks of oak. In that way, the leaves that make up a finished design acquire the ribs and veins that make them astonishingly real, and also capable of spreading and shedding water in the way that he wants. "Empirical engineering" is how he describes it. Miraculous, I'd say, when you consider for instance that his hart's tongue fern fountain needs three different water

feeds, to the upper, middle and lower set of leaves that make up the whole construction. Each of the feeds has to be set at a particular pressure so that the lowest one doesn't take all the available water.

One of his first pieces of work appeared in a garden at the Hampton Court Flower Show (look out for his hart's tongue fern fountain in the *Daily Mail* pavilion at the show this weekend). "The secret is to exploit the things that water can naturally do," he explains. "Surface tension makes water cling to a leaf as it runs down. You actually need very little water to get a great effect." And the pieces are so cleverly made, you need to look hard to see how it's done. Exit points for the water are often hidden under the joint, if a leaf, or under the curve if a petal. I'm tempted by the thought of installing a few of his low, fat

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Main picture, above: Humphrey Bowden, surrounded by some of his exquisite ornamental water features, in his West Sussex garden. Left: detail of a small water feature