

Spectacular SMALL POOLS

Discover how these charming aquatic treasures make a big statement.

By Debra Maurer

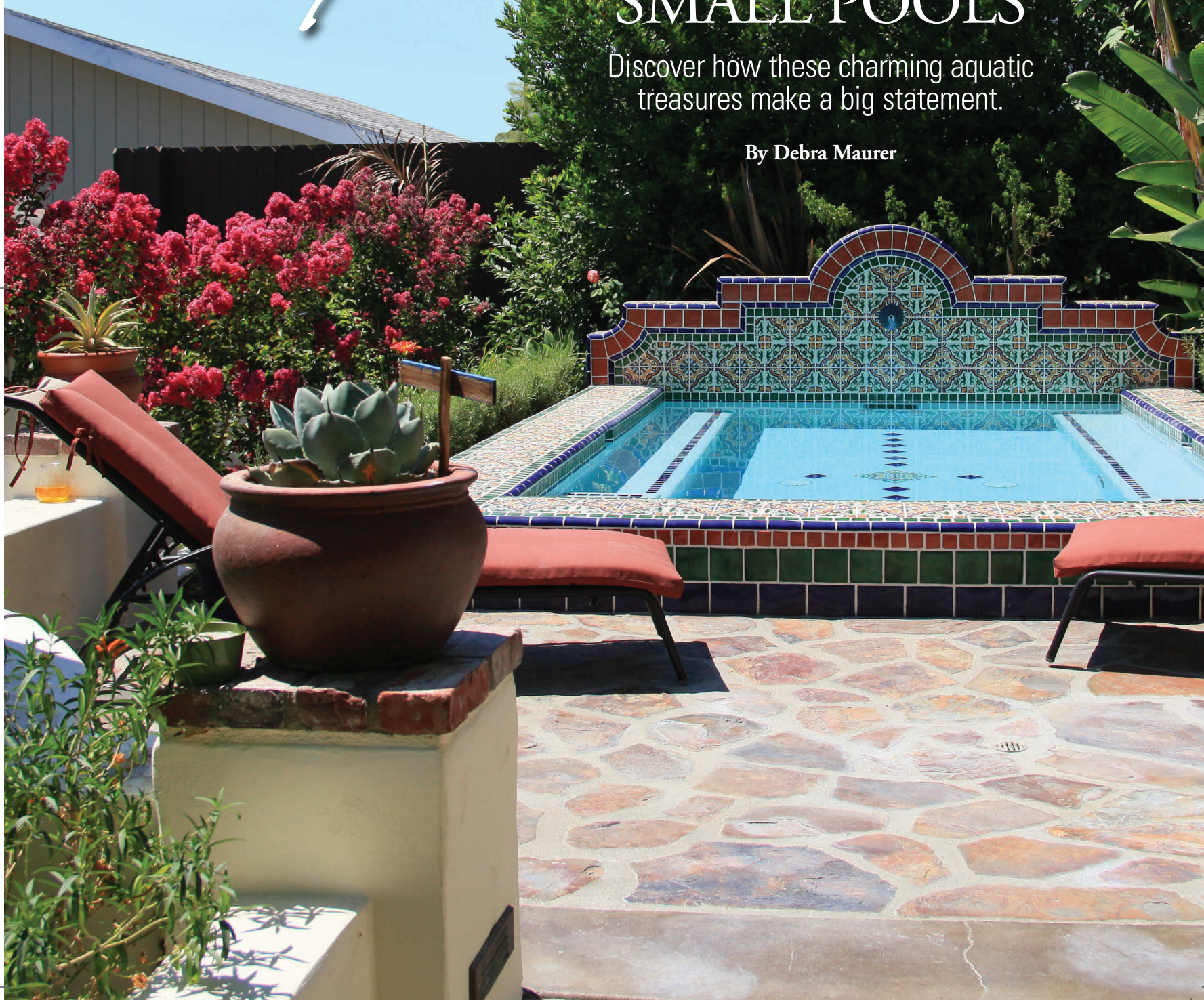




Photo courtesy of Fluid Dynamics Pool & Spa; Designer: Alison Terry, Terry Design, Inc.; Photograph by Christian Terry

A swimming pool is the staple of many luxurious outdoor environments, but just because it garners your attention doesn't mean it has to dominate your backyard. Smaller versions of these aquatic beauties are popping up all over the country for a variety of reasons. Whether it's to accommodate a small lot, double as a water feature, or leave room on your property for other amenities, these mini water hubs are never short on style. If you're ready to buy a pool, consider the benefits of one that's small-scale yet upscale.

How Small?

Most average/mid-size pools are more than 600 square feet. Therefore, when we say "small," we're referring to pools that are 600 square feet or less. "Depending on the design, a 350-square-foot pool typically measures somewhere around 12 – 17 feet across by 24 – 30 feet in length," says Ron Bennett, Jr., designer/builder at Premier Pools & Spas in Las Vegas, Nev. "Pools of this size are not recommended for diving, so we keep more of the pool useable by going no more than 6 feet deep; many are 5 feet deep or less."

Reasons to Scale Down

The most obvious reason to build a small pool is, of course, if you have a small backyard. In certain areas of the country, such as Arizona and Florida, tiny walled-in yards are quite common. While some of these lots may be able to fit a full-size pool, it would most likely encompass the entire backyard; that's why many homeowners opt for a downsized version, so they can make the most of their yard when they aren't swimming. This goes for small lots across the country, and even homes with spacious backyards. "We've built smaller pools on larger lots, allowing more space for outdoor barbecue areas, patios for entertaining, or lush landscaping," says Bennett, Jr.

"Sometimes the client does not want the pool and decking to take up their whole backyard. They still want room for their kids to kick a soccer ball or play on the playground, so a smaller pool fits their needs," says Mike Higgins, sales associate at Platinum Poolcare,



Photo courtesy of Premier Pools and Spas; Pool designed by Ron Bennett; Photograph by Camilla Sjodin

Ltd., in Wheeling, Ill. For one of his projects, he built a small modern pool and spa right up against a wall of windows that face the home's backyard. He worked closely with the architect who designed and built the house to ensure that everything worked in the design. "The project is in Chicago where yard space is very limited, but we were able to give the homeowners everything on their wish list," says Higgins. "They have a small child and use the pool to splash around and cool off. They also entertain a lot, so the adjacent spa and water feature were ideal."

With the proper designer, a small pool can also make good use of a particular section of a multilevel backyard. This was the scenario of a hillside California home in which the entire property is terraced. The homeowners desired a pool where they could swim, jog, and stay fit; they also wanted an entertaining area that would complement their 1928 Spanish Colonial Revival home. The solution was to install a custom 9-by-15-foot swim spa on a rarely used terrace. Designed by Landscape Architect Alison Terry of Terry Design, Inc., and built by Dave Penton, owner of Fluid Dynamics Pool & Spa, Fullerton, Calif., the swim spa features a swim current at one end and a Spanish fountain on the back wall (see pages 24–25).

A major design consideration was making sure the swim spa was interesting to look at when viewed from the second-story balcony. "I wanted the owners and guests to look down and see a beautiful tiled water feature/fountain,



Photo courtesy of Fluid Dynamics Pool & Spa; Designer: Alison Terry, Terry Design, Inc.; Photograph by Christian Terry



Photo courtesy of Platinum Poolcare, Ltd.; Photography by Ourvision Photography

not a utilitarian pool or spa,” says Terry. The use of imported custom hand-painted tile provides bold splashes of color and a stunning view from every perspective.

“When not used for swimming, it serves as a decorative water feature and lounge area,” says Terry. “The raised bond beam allows for seating around the perimeter, while built-in benches offer interior seating if guests want to cool off, relax, and socialize.” Surrounded by Mediterranean plantings, the terrace also features a fireplace accented with the same tile used in the spa.

Up for the Challenge

These pools may be small, but their installation is by no means simple, especially when working with a confined space. Most small pools are the product of precise, innovative designs, and complex construction. Builders and designers have to find the best way to maximize the space, decide where the pool equipment will go, and determine how the construction equipment will be maneuvered around the site.

Penton recalls one project (pictured on page 26, bottom) where his crew at Fluid Dynamics had to dig a 270-square-foot pool (9 feet wide, 3.5 to 5 feet deep) and a 50-square-foot integrated spa *by hand*. “The only access to the back of the property was up three flights of stairs. Without bringing in a crane to lift a bobcat over the house, we were forced to dig the pool by hand,” he says. “We laid down a large tarp over the front staircase and used the dirt we excavated from the backyard to build a makeshift ramp; this made it easier to run the wheelbarrows to the trucks out front.”

The homeowners of this small yard wanted a lap pool, spa, and outdoor kitchen. Their teenage son, who runs track, measured the depth of the pool he runs in at his gym, and the pool was built at the same depth. “My challenges were to make the pool sizeable enough to swim laps, and to make the spa easily accessible from the house,” says Terry,


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who designed the project.

Terry angled the pool to accentuate the long axis of the yard, giving the illusion of depth and making the lot seem larger. She used a combination of stone (flagstone and veneer), tile coping, and decorative ceramic tile accents to give the yard a spectacular look. The outdoor kitchen includes a dining area, a fireplace, and even an outdoor TV. The surrounding plants and pergola roof give this small area a very open feeling.

The area for the mechanical systems had to be kept to an absolute minimum. "Since this pool needed multiple pumps, a heater, and large filter, we had to get creative with the pool equipment pad layout," says Penton. "We utilized racks to stack the pumps and chose specific equipment based on the required clearances to make sure that we could fit everything into a small space but still make it accessible for servicing."

Looking Forward

Some builders have seen a recent increase in the number of small pools they build. "Most of the residential swimming pools we have built in the last five to 10 years are less than 600 square feet; many are even much smaller. Every year we build a number of 'spools' (small dipping pools used for relaxation or as showpieces for water features), which are

less than 300 square feet," says Bennett, Jr.

"Here in Southern California, lot sizes tend to be small, so smaller pools are becoming much more common," says Penton.

Higgins has not seen an increase in small pools; the average pool project done by his company is at least 800 square feet, and in most cases includes a spa. However, he has observed an increase in 'staycationing': "It seems that people are traveling less, and as a result, are doing more with their backyard space by adding pools, spas, water features, outdoor kitchens, fireplaces, pool houses, etc." Many homeowners are putting bigger investments into their backyards and looking to maximize their space.

In addition to allowing more room for entertainment space, smaller pools are also more eco-friendly than larger pools. They consume less energy and chemicals, require less water, and take a shorter amount of time to heat. This means you'll also save on energy bills and maintenance/heating costs.

"Even on our full-size projects we can consider making the pools shallower and having large shallow tanning ledges in the pool to minimize the overall volume of water; this way, the pool is more energy-efficient but still looks attractive," says Penton.

Whether a small pool comes to fruition out of preference or necessity, it can still make a big splash in your backyard. ♦



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