POOLS CAPES

The right plants in the right places can make a short summer sparkle

CLOCK COLLECTOR IS ALL WOUND UP SLIDESHOW AT LOHUD.COM/VIEW
“People say pools are only for four months of the year in this climate, but what a great four months it is.”

Landscape designer: Jan Johannsen
The next wave

Landscaping makes all the difference in pool design

BY BILL CARY

As you make your way down along the grassy path from the 1930s hilltop house on Lounsbury Road in Croton-on-Hudson to the secluded pool area that sits just below the apple orchard, a hint of sun warms the back of your neck just before you settle into one of the large wooden chairs at the edge of the pool.

The ornamental grasses behind you sway gently as a river breeze catches the seed heads, sending them bobbing in the brightening morning light. The shadow of the great oak that stands between you and the Hudson begins to stretch out across the hillside and the gauzy morning haze over the river seems to be lifting, bringing with it the promise of another great day poolside.

"When people put in a pool, their entire use of their property changes," says landscape designer Jan Johnsen, the designer who transformed this rocky ledge into an oasis for a Croton family of four. "You'll be out here in the early morning and then later in the evening."

"Your garden changes, too," says Johnsen, who also lives in Croton. "It becomes much more immediate, much more intimate — you're living inside your garden now."

"Of course," she says, gesturing out toward the wide-angle shot of the Hudson, "it doesn't hurt that you have one of the best views in Westchester County."

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Poolside plants

Swimming pools are fun sites that can take a wide range of plant materials. Here are a few favorites from landscape designer Jan Johnsen, ones that work particularly well around Hudson Valley pools. Most are deer-resistant and low-maintenance. If you're in a hurry for color, you can't go wrong with annuals.

**Annuals**
- Angelonia
- Agryranthemum
- Bacopa  (*Sutera cordata*)
- Calibrachoa Million Bells
- Diascia
- New Guinea impatiens
- Salvia 'Victoria Blue'
- Strawflower  (*Helichrysum bracteatum*)

**Perennials and grasses**
- Black fountain grass  (*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Moudry'), an aggressive self-seeder
- Blue fescue  (*Festuca 'Elijah Blue'*)
- Blue switch grass  (*Panicum virgatum 'Prairie Sky'*)
- Butterfly bush  (*Buddleia*)
- Catmint  (*Nepeta*)
- Dwarf fountain grass  (*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hamein')
- Japanese silver grass  (*Miscanthus sinensis 'Morning Light'*)
- Maiden grass  (*Miscanthus sinensis 'Gracillimus'*)
- Russian sage  (*Perovskia 'Little Spire'*)
- Salvia 'May Night'
- Sedum 'Vera Jameson' — not deer-resistant
- Siberian iris
- Tickseed  (*Coreopsis vertic. 'Moonbeam'*)

**Shrubs**
- Boxwood
- Potentilla  *Abbottwood*
- Spirea  (*Spirea thunbergii 'Ogon,' known as Mellow Yellow*)
- Prague viburnum  (*Viburnum 'Pragense'*)
- Roses, including Fairy, Knockout and rugosa
- Sargent's juniper  (*Juniperus chinensis sargentii*)
- Rose mallow  (*Hibiscus moscheutos 'Disco Belle') — not deer-resistant

**Trees**
- Kousa dogwood  'Milky Way'
- Rutgers hybrid dogwood  'Constellation'
- Weeping cherry
- Weeping Norway spruce

**Winning combinations**
- Buddleia and ornamental grasses
- Potentilla  'Abbottwood' and Russian sage
- Spirea  'Little Princess' with *Spirea 'Ogon'* (Mellow Yellow) and Russian sage 'Little Spire'
- Prague viburnum and boxwood
- Liriope plant 'Limelight' with yellow lantana and night-blooming jasmine

Bill Cary

Photography by Mark Veinari
Anybody can build a nice swimming pool, she says. The key is finding the right spot for it and then integrating the pool into the surrounding landscape with summer-thriving plants and stone features such as decking, walls and pathways that make it even more inviting.

For this site, Johnsen, who owns Bedford Hills-based Johnsen Landscapes & Pools with her husband, Rafael Algarin, designed a rounded, bowl-shaped area to hold the pool and surrounding gardens. Shrubs and perennials start low at the front edge of the river view and grow in height and width to envelop you in privacy.

The 20-by-40-foot pool is made of gunite, with a white quartz finish. “Most people use a blue finish,” Johnsen says. “This client wanted white. They were going for a pale, modern L.A. look, like a David Hockney painting.”

Johnsen highly recommends gunite over the cheaper and faster-to-build vinyl that’s wrapped around a premade mold or polymer structure. “When people tell me they can’t afford gunite, I say wait five years until you can,” she says.

Not only do the poolside plants you choose provide screening and privacy, they also bring in loads of color and visual interest and perhaps create an illu-

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The poolside palette for this hilltop Croton pool, right, includes ornamental grasses, Russian sage, butterfly bush, boxwood and, below, a garden ornament that the owner found at an antiques fair in Rhinebeck.
sion of being somewhere well beyond the Hudson Valley.

Johnsen likes to use plants that thrive in summer. "You don’t really care what the pool area looks like in winter."

"People say pools are only for four months of the year in this climate, but what a great four months it is," she says.

Johnsen went to landscape school in Hawaii in the 1970s and discovered a tropical palette of plants such as camas, lantanas, licorice and hibiscus that she likes to work into New York and Connecticut gardens.

One of her favorites is hibiscus ‘Disco Belle,’ which she planted as a decorative hedge last year for a new pool in Somers for Cole and Claire Oram. In another year, the hibiscus plants should reach a height of 4 to 5 feet and completely hide a retaining wall.

"I can’t rave enough about them," Johnsen says. "If you have one or two, that’s OK, but if you do a whole run of them, it looks just fantastic."

She also likes to use plants that bring fragrance into the pool area, such as roses, summersweet, night-blooming jasmine and rosemary.

For the Orams, she planted a few small specimen trees near the pool, including a weeping blue atlas spruce that picks up accents in the blues that Claire Oram chose for the poolside umbrellas, flower pots and chair cushions. Weeping trees work well near water, Johnsen says.

For the pools that he designs, Jon Feldman, a landscaper designer and the owner of G. biloba Garden Environments in Nyack, likes to use "grasses, seascape kinds of things. Creepy, crawly things are good, too."

Feldman’s company also maintains pool sites for clients, including a just-bigger-than-a-bathtub kidney-style pool and garden that was designed by Ann Brooke and shoe-horned into a small back yard on North Midland Avenue in Nyack.

"I wanted to make it look like a holiday resort, something that you go away to," says Brooke, a landscape designer in Nyack. "I wanted to make it very exciting, very private."

She likes pools with plantings that come right up to the edge of the water on one or two sides to create the illusion of a natural pond, such as the fountain grass that spills over the edge of this pool almost into the pale-blue water.

"You can’t always use it, but I really like bamboo because it goes so well with water," Brooke says.

For some sites, Feldman uses herbs and plants with interesting foliage. "A lot of people are really skittish about flowers near the pool because they at-

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tract bees,” he says.

For the hilltop site in Croton, Johnsen chose mostly deer-resistant, long-blooming and low-maintenance perennials such as nepeta, spirea, barberry, Russian sage, potentilla and buddleia (butterfly bush), which combines particularly well with ornamental grasses. The grasses here include variegated miscanthus, maiden grass, dwarf fountain grass ‘Hameln,’ zebra grass and pennisetum ‘Moudry’ (an aggressive self-seeder, so be careful).

For the threshold area at the main gate for the pool, Johnsen added 3-inch-thick pink granite pavers. Most people leave this as a grassy area that gets muddy and worn down with foot traffic.

Another challenge for homeowners with pools is how to hide the statemandated 4-foot fence and make the area large enough so you don’t feel like you’re sitting in a pen. Johnsen favors fencing made of black aluminum, which tends to disappear in the landscape, and then plants shrubs and ornamental grasses on either side.

Brooke uses fast-growing climbers with lots of blooms to hide pool fences, such as the clematis vines and vigorous New Dawn rose that she chose for the North Midland yard in Nyack.

Nighttime lighting adds another dimension to summers around a pool.

For her pools, including the hillside one in Croton that’s now shimmering in the last rays of the setting sun over the river, Johnsen hides brass step lights within the stone walls and sets other discreet lights among the plantings.

Let’s add Tiki torches and perhaps a string of colored lights in paper lanterns. Time to fire up another poolside party and hope this summer never ends.

Sources
Michael’s Garden Gate Nursery, Mount Kisco, 914-666-3177.

Flowering plants come right to the edge of this kidney-style pool in Nyack.