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A Chic Swimming Pool Alternative for Small Backyards

No room for a full-size pool but still wish you could float around a while, or sip cocktails with your feet in the water? Look into a plunge pool, small enough for a brownstone's backyard.



SPIFF SPLASH Greenwich, Conn., landscape architect Janice Parker set a sofa so sitters' feet can dangle in the water.

PHOTO: NEIL LANDINO JR.

AN ELEGANT compromise between a yard-usurping swimming pool and a Nemo-themed kiddies' inflatable, the plunge pool has surged in popularity. According to Heather Goerzen, managing editor of design content for online interiors service Havenly, plunge pools became an 'it' project during Covid, rivaling home-baked sourdough. Plunge pool manufacturer Soake Pools, in Pembroke, N.H., said that its revenue for the first half of 2022 is 14.5 times higher than in the first half of 2019.

Larger than a hot tub but too small for swimming laps, petite pools are particularly popular in areas with micro-yards, whether due to real-estate prices, tiny lots or both. For anyone who's so constrained but still longing to sip a cocktail while soaking on a pool step or to cannonball in after a long day, these little dippers can appeal. Athletic types can outfit the setup with an artificial current that provides resistance for swimming in place, like an aquatic treadmill.



A plunge pool by Soake Pools, deftly integrated into a Milton, Mass., patio by Nawada Landscape Design.

PHOTO: JON CARON ART

Built from concrete or fiberglass, the often-prefab pools are lined with tile, vinyl or gunite (a blend of sand, cement and water). The footprint falls between 15 to 20 feet long and 6 to 10 feet wide with a flat bottom at a depth of 4 to 7 feet. Starting at \$40,000, say most designers, plunge pools are both relatively economical and easier to integrate into landscaping than is a standard 36-foot-long pool. In Milton, Mass., designer Jenn Nawada tucked a Soake pool into the corner of a reclaimed-brick patio. She clad the aboveground portion with stone veneer that also wraps around contiguous planters. Handsome bluestone coping caps the walls, and coddling plantings set off the pool from the rest of the expansive lot. New York City designer Daun Curry considers such verdant borders crucial. Plunge pools, she warned, “can feel underwhelming on larger properties if not incorporated into a well-designed landscape.”

Bo Massey, a designer in Inlet Beach, Fla., values the diminutive dunks' versatility. "They're small enough to easily heat, so they serve as a pool in summer and a hot tub in colder months." If you sub in a pool chiller for a heater, the setup becomes a cold plunge like the one Holly Thaggard, founder of skin-care brand Supergoop, recently added to her home in San Antonio. Set to 44 degrees, the pool recreates spa treatments that she and her husband found helped their bodies recover from long hikes. "We became so hooked on how alive and refreshed it made us feel, we needed one for our own house," she said.

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In Greenwich, Conn., local landscape architect Janice Parker added three little waterfalls to the wall that edges a fully in-ground version she surrounded with lawn and hydrangeas, shown above. Given its small size and oasis-like surroundings, she said it "feels like floating in the garden rather than going

for a swim in the pool."