



This 5.5- x 11-m (18- x 36-ft) concrete pool had been a good friend over the decades—it had done its job well. In spite of regular attention to maintenance, it was starting to show the years.

# A CHANGE OF

How to spruce up your pool on a budget

BY DAVE CLARK  
Photos courtesy Betz Pools

When it comes to personal relationships, unconditional love is a wonderful thing. When it comes to your time-worn backyard pool, however, it might not be the best approach. Change can be a struggle at the best of times, but thankfully, when it comes to backyard pools, there are lots of attractive options available that won't break the bank.



The pool shell was sound and only needed cosmetic repairs. The contractor suggested lowering the pool wall by 63.5 mm (2.5 in.) to allow for the installation of natural flagstone coping.

# SCENERY

## WHY RENOVATE?

In the early 1990s, trend forecasters predicted people would start to escape from the fast-paced world and spend more time together at home. After nearly two decades—and a serious global recession—those predictions seem to have come true. Even throughout several ups and downs in the housing market, the home renovation market has been on a steady climb for almost 20 years. In these hectic times, people are also trying to simplify their lives and be more deliberate about how they spend their time and money. Those who may have been able to afford multiple residences in the past (e.g. a home and summer cottage) are now focusing on one property and making it the best it can be, often with a great swimming pool as part of the picture.

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While many homeowners are choosing to add a pool to their property, those who already have a pool are looking to spruce up their existing backyard getaway. There are a whole host of reasons for pool renovation, but whatever the reason, there are certain steps you must take to ensure your pool renovation project doesn't fall short of expectations and exceed your budget.

This is exactly what one Toronto couple did when they recently decided to tackle a renovation project. Their custom concrete pool had served them well over the years—the kids had grown up with it, friends had gathered to enjoy it and the ravine lot surrounding it had created a sheltered oasis, protected with a natural wall of green.



A 4.3-m (14-ft) section of the pool wall was cut away to accommodate a new water feature. It was placed on the far side of the pool to be the visual point of interest from the kitchen.



Dry gunite, the strongest concrete available, was used to rebuild the new section of wall. The three-fountain water feature was flanked on each side by underwater swim-up benches.

The only downside was the condition of the pool; sadly, it was starting to show its age. While the owners had been meticulous about maintenance, worn surfaces, faded materials and the occasional crack here and there indicated it was time for renewal. The family had also recently remodelled their kitchen, complete with a gorgeous walkout deck overlooking the pool. A pool renovation was the obvious next step. This story serves as a great case study of a renovation gone right, which can serve as an example to any homeowner looking to spruce up their backyard oasis.

### STEP 1: ASSESSING THE DAMAGE

Before this Toronto family could begin making plans, they first had to perform a thorough assessment of their pool. This is the vital first step in any renovation project.

No matter how big or small, no renovation project can be started until the integrity of the pool shell is checked. In the Toronto couple's case, the contractor surveyed the pool from top to bottom for stress cracks, which can be telltale signs of impending pool shell fractures. Fortunately, from a structural standpoint, this particular pool was rock solid.

However, in cases where the pool shell is faulty, there are various options available depending on the condition of the shell. There are a number of procedures for minor cracks such as epoxy injection or a 'v-groove' cut away and repair. More serious deterioration can sometimes be fixed by building a new shell within the existing one; sometimes it is better to remove and replace the shell altogether.

Next, levels were checked to ensure nothing had moved out of alignment over the years, which they hadn't. Sometimes, when pools have been left empty for extended periods, its shell can shift or 'float up' just enough to be a problem. These issues can be overcome, but with some aggravation and added expense.

When performing your own assessment, start with the obvious things like the condition of the pool's interior, coping and tile around the waterline. Sometimes, these faults are only cosmetic and can be fixed quite easily by updating a few components. It's amazing how new marbelite, along with some fresh tile and coping, can give your pool a bright new look. If budget is a factor, these fixes could be separated into two phases, with coping and tile done one year and a new interior finish a year or two later.

Unfortunately, some pools may require a bit more than a quick fix. If the surrounding deck needs to be replaced, you might want to consider making some additional updates at the same time. For example, when replacing a deck, it often makes sense to redo the underground plumbing. There's no point in putting a beautiful new deck over old plumbing that may have to be replaced in a few years.

### STEP 2: MAKING A PLAN

After consulting with a neighbour who had just installed a beautiful pool and raved about the contractor, the family called for a consultation. It was a good move, as the professional advice they received pointed out options they hadn't considered. In addition, the contractor

## SIMPLE POOL RENOVATION IDEAS

- **To freshen up** the look of your pool, a vinyl-liner replacement can be had for a few thousand dollars;
- **If your pool's marblite finish** is in reasonable condition (mildly discoloured or pitted), it can be acid washed and hydro-polished to brighten and smooth the finish;
- **You can replace** existing pool lights with brighter, energy-efficient light emitting diode (LED) lights;
- **If your deck** is still structurally sound, often it can be resurfaced using materials such as recycled rubber, epoxy pea-gravel aggregate, man-made stone, random-cut natural flagstone or cedar planks;
- **By freshening** the landscaping around your pool it can help take the attention away from time-worn components; and
- **Landscape night lighting** can add pizzazz to your pool area after dark.

offered to take the owners to view existing pools, which included the features they were considering. If you are considering a pool renovation, ask your potential contractor about seeing his or her past projects. You can't beat seeing the real thing if you want to know what you're getting.


The Toronto project started with simple things like updating the diving board, adding more return jets for improved circulation and skimming, updating the automatic pool cleaner and installing a new skimmer housing and pool light. Then, additional steps were taken, including the installation of a water feature, cutting down the pool wall to allow for natural flagstone coping and re-coating the interior with a premium white Armourcoat.

Then, the old concrete deck was removed and new concrete was poured and made ready for colouring and stamping. A wide variety of shades and patterns are available, but the 'skin pattern' with brown/beige base and black/grey accents was chosen to complement the flagstone. At the far end of the pool, the deck was extended by a few feet to create more room for entertaining, and the diving board was replaced with a new one which was colour-matched to the deck.

Since the deck was also being replaced, it made sense to install new underground plumbing lines from the pool to the equipment pad. At this point, it was also a good time to update the filter, pump and heater—it would cost less than having the contractor come back later.

One of the things that gave the pool a dated look was its coping, which was made from 6-mm (0.25-in.) quarry tile. The solution was to cut a 63.5-mm (2.5-in.) strip off the top of the pool wall to accommodate a modern 50-mm (2-in.) flagstone coping. Warton pebble-top flagstone was selected because it would provide a striking contrast to the pool's white interior. Matching 152- x 304-mm (6- x 12-in.) porcelain slate-look tiles were installed along the waterline.

When it comes to choosing your own renovations or additions, take advantage of recent developments in pool technology. For example, if you need to replace the liner in your vinyl-liner pool, there are now alterations available that will mimic the appearance of a concrete pool. The process involves removing the deck so the integral aluminum or plastic coping can be replaced with a universal side-mount coping. This allows for the installation of natural flagstone coping, which overhangs the pool by about 38 mm (1.5 in.), creating the appearance of concrete.



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**After:** The highlight of the renovation was the water feature with its fountain heads spouting a mixture of water and air to create a foaming action. The new ledge rock wall provides a solid backdrop.



**After:** A pool renovation can seem daunting, but with the help of an experienced contractor the result can be most rewarding. Your new backyard will suddenly become the focal point for outdoor activity.

**After:** A new deck in stamped concrete was installed. It featured a 'skin pattern' with a brown/beige base and black/grey accents to complement the Warton pebble-top flagstone coping.



Another common renovation option is the elimination of the deep end, making a pool a uniform depth, which is ideal for family activities such as water sports. Other options could include the addition of a diving rock to replace a diving board, walk-in steps, a water feature or even a whirlpool spa. If you decide to add landscaping to the mix, the possibilities are nearly endless. Many spectacular backyard environments have been born out of a simple pool renovation.

### STEP 3: ADDING THE FINAL TOUCHES

A highlight of the project was a new water feature with fountainheads spouting a mixture of water and air to create a foaming action. Underwater swim-up benches, where bathers could appreciate the feature close up, were placed on either side of the fountains. The whole structure would be framed by a 609-mm (24-in.) elevated

feature wall, clad with a Warton-ledge rock facing and flagstone coping. It was placed on the far side of the pool so it would be a visual point of interest from the house.

The homeowners had already beautifully landscaped their yard and were a bit concerned about damage that might occur with heavy equipment travelling back and forth. In light of this, the contractor installed a plywood road and used power wheelbarrows instead of heavy machinery to do most of the hauling. The result was worth the effort—only a single patio stone was broken, which was immediately replaced by the contractor.

Once everything was connected and the deck was finished, the new Armourcoat interior, which featured subtle blue-quartz crystals, was installed. The bright white surface looked clean and refreshing when filled with water and the quartz crystals added an interesting sparkle in any light. It was now time to try the new LED pool light, which delivered beautifully on its promise to cut down on electricity and provide brighter light. The only thing remaining was to turn on the fountainheads.

### FIND YOUR INSPIRATION

Like these Toronto homeowners, you too can renovate an aging pool area into a new beautiful backyard oasis. All it takes is some careful planning, consultations and a little bit of inspiration. ➔

**DAVE CLARK** represents Betz Pools in Stouffville, Ont., a builder and renovator of concrete and vinyl-lined swimming pools and spas.