

Don't dive in just yet: 11 things to think about before you buy a pool

So you're thinking about getting a backyard pool that doesn't come with an inflation nozzle. You're in good company. According to the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals, there are about 8.5 million private pools in the U.S. (That includes above ground and inground.) Built properly, a pool can add to both the value of your home and your sheer enjoyment of it. But installing a pool is a major investment, not only in terms of the immediate installation cost, but also long-term expenses, time for upkeep and responsibility for the homeowner. Before you take the plunge (sorry, but that phrase is required in all blogs about pool ownership...) here are 11 things you should think about.

1. Know how you'll use your pool

If you're buying your pool primarily for family leisure, your needs will be different than if you're looking to use your pool mostly for fitness. Will the pool only be used by your immediate family and a few close friends, or do you see yourself needing a bigger design to accommodate lots of guests? Picture yourself in your pool, and make a list of your wants and needs.

2. Learn about the different types of pools and decide what's right for you

Above ground, inground and recessed pools all offer distinct advantages, depending on your preferences, lifestyle or backyard layout. Pools can also be made of different materials (fiberglass, concrete, vinyl) that each have their pluses and minuses. Research as much as you can about different pool types, looking at lots of sources (not just a single company's website). If you know someone who has a pool, ask them why they chose that type and what they like (or don't) about owning it.

3. Figure out where your pool will be

You need a more specific answer than "the backyard." Look at your yard and think realistically about where a pool could be positioned and how much room it might take up. If you have a smaller yard, are you OK giving over a large portion of it to a pool? Look for challenges in your yard too, like roots, overhead power lines, or overhanging trees. The more you have to modify your yard to fit the pool, the more it may cost. Don't forget about space for things like accessories...do you have storage space available, or might you need to build a shed?

4. Know the rules for installing a pool

Your city or town will have ordinances that govern the construction of a pool (where it can be, how large, the type, etc.). Your neighborhood association or homeowner's association may have rules as well. Find out as much as you can early on, to avoid disappointment and frustration during actual design and installation.

5. Understand what it will take to maintain your pool

When you're thinking about what type of pool might be right for you, make maintenance part of your comparison shopping. Some pools are harder to keep clean than others, or require more repairs over time. Think about how this impacts the time and dollars you'll spend on your pool. If you're working with a reputable pool company, they should be able to provide you with an accurate idea of the annual maintenance needs and costs for your pool.

6. Know your pool budget: initial purchase and annual care

Many buyers focus on the upfront cost to purchase and install their pool, but never think about the long-term and associated costs of the pool. We talked about maintenance under #5, but there are several other factors that can impact cost. Some of the things that can add to the cost of pool ownership include: accessories, equipment for care and maintenance, landscaping, homeowner's insurance (check with your agent to see if your rates will increase if you add a pool) and, because a pool can raise the value of your home, you could have a small increase in property taxes. None of these expenses have to break the bank, provided you are aware of them and can plan accordingly. Just make "the pool" a new line item in your monthly household budget.

7. Plan early

Lots of people only think about buying a pool when it's 90 degrees outside, and they're over-eager to get one installed. But this is a big decision that shouldn't be rushed. If a backyard pool is up for consideration, start your research early. Winter is actually a great time because you have a few months to do all your research before breaking ground in the spring. Once you've made an informed decision, you may also find pool companies that offer discounts for making a purchase in the winter off-season.

8. Consider how a pool might affect selling your home in the future

Pools do add to your property value, and to maximize that, it helps to think about how a future homeowner might use your pool. Is it easily accessible if the new owner is older, or has young children? It is universally attractive and useful? Like building an addition, your pool is something that will stay with the house for many years (even decades) to come, so try to think about not just what you will enjoy in your new pool, but what anyone would enjoy if they purchased your home years from now.

9. Find out what safety features your pool will need

Some form of controlled access (a fence or cover) will be necessary with your pool, but your homeowners insurance, neighborhood association or local ordinances may have specific requirements. Make sure you know what your pool needs to meet safety standards.

10. Choose a company with a proven record and trusted references

Look for a pool company that has been in business for many years (10+ is a good benchmark) and has a good reputation (look for reviews from trusted consumer sources, like the Better Business Bureau). Ask the company for references (which they should readily provide) and don't be afraid to comparison shop. You should feel completely comfortable with the company you're working with: They should always answer your questions and never make you feel pressured to sign a contract. You should be able to easily understand what your pool will cost, how it's being financed, how it has to be maintained and how it will be installed.

11. Prepare to be popular

You may imagine your pool as your own little private retreat, but, especially if you have kids, your pool may become a very popular destination for extended family, friends and neighbors. Think about how you will plan for this, and what your ground rules will be for having guests to the pool. Particularly with kids, you need to ensure you can provide adequate supervision for swimmers. A pool is a wonderful thing to share and a great way to bring people to your home for special times. Just don't let your backyard oasis turn into a constant hosting obligation.

Note, source for pool stat: <http://apsp.org/portals/0/images/APSP%20statistics%202013.jpg>