

A pool that's above but not beyond

Above-ground models are making a splash because they're affordable and relatively easy to install.

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Special to *The Times*

SHORTLY after we settled into our home in Claremont, the warm weather offered a reminder: It was time to think about adding a built-in pool to our backyard.

Unfortunately, more pressing improvements had left our bank account far less sizable than the yard, and our sights turned to a secondary option: an above-ground pool.

With summer in full swing, above-ground pools seem to be popping up in backyards from Crescent City to National City, and there are several reasons why.

High on the list is the uncertain economy, which has left many homeowners unwilling or unable to spend money on costlier in-ground pools. In California, above-ground pools cost an average of \$1,200 and can range up to \$5,000, compared with an average of \$30,000 for a 30-foot-long, built-in pool, according to dealers.

At the same time, technology has enabled manufacturers to exceed the more basic models that baby boomers were accustomed to seeing 30 or 40 years ago. Plus, the relative ease of setup and removal can be a draw.

Do-it-yourselfers can install a high-end pool in a weekend or less, with a shovel, screwdriver, level and string. For the less mechanically inclined, the pros can do it in several hours for about \$1,000, including grading, layout, assembly and installation of the pump, filter and lights.

In better pools, the wall is made of galvanized steel with a copper core. The top rim and wall braces are usually galvanized steel, and the liner is vinyl. Pools that are smaller or include less substantial materials, such as heavy-gauge vinyl, can be installed in a matter of hours.

"An above-ground pool is more of an impulse purchase," said Suzanne Barrows, senior communications director for the National Spa & Pool Institute, a trade association. "The thinking goes,

'It's hot, the kids are cranky, so let's go buy a pool.' You can be cooling off tomorrow."

Add a sprawling deck, interior lights and well-placed flora and the result can be striking — and perhaps a better investment than an in-ground pool.

"A nice above-ground pool would at least be a better financial investment, would definitely make a home more marketable and may add some value to the home, though not as much as it costs to install," said Gary Boyer, an agent with Hill Top Real Estate in Glendora.

Still, above-ground pools have their limits: The vinyl and metal may be

prone to damage, and some people don't find them as aesthetically pleasing. Plus, you can't dive, jump or slide into them, according to the pool trade association's Web site, www.nspi.org.

The organization estimates that more than 315,000 above-ground pools at least 3 feet deep and requiring a pump and filter were in use in California last year, up 4% from 2001; that total represents one-fourth of existing pools in the state. Nationally, up to 3.8 million families may own above-ground pools, the association says.

Another popularity indicator: Shelves at Wal-Mart, Kmart and other retail outlets are stocked with above-ground

pool and filter kits, from less than \$100 to more than \$3,000, and sales are brisk.

As with any pool, safety is a major consideration. When an above-ground pool isn't in use, the steps or ladders on the ground should be removed, and gates leading to the pool locked, to prevent children from entering. You should check with your city to determine what kind of building and safety precautions apply. And kids should always be supervised by an adult who knows cardiopulmonary resuscitation and rescue techniques.

There are several manufacturers of above-ground pools, including Doughboy, Easy Set, Kayak, Medallion and

Swim'n Play.

In our family's case, the raised deck around our circular Doughboy pool has steps at both ends for entry and exit. The pool is lighted for night swimming, and a redwood table with surrounding benches allows for dining. We paid about \$800 to have two workers install the pool, and it took them several hours. Of course, ours was high-end — lots of metal in the siding, rail and so forth — and the yard was rocky, so grading at the base was difficult.

Since we had it installed last year, the pool has become a magnet for neighborhood kids, who consider it a novelty of sorts. But we know better.



Los Angeles Times
July 17, 2003

KEN HIVERLY/Los Angeles Times

COOL SOLUTION: The Wagner family pool features a raised deck, steps at both ends, a dining area and it's lighted for night swimming. Do-it-yourselfers can install a high-end above-ground pool in a weekend; pros can do it in several hours for about \$1,000.