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Salty pools make a splash

BY AMBER EATON

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As the weather heats up, some Arkansans are stocking up on chlorine to ready their in-ground swimming pools for summer fun. Others are buying salt, instead.

Using salt to control bacteria and algae in private pools is gaining popularity, according to pool installers. The system allows the owners to manufacture chlorine right in their backyards with a device known as a saltwater chlorinator.

Salt, or sodium chloride, is dissolved in the pool water to create a ratio of 3,000 to 4,000 parts per million. That's nowhere near the eye-burning quantity in ocean water, which has about 35,000 parts per million, or even a human teardrop, with about 9,000 parts per million.

The water passes through an electrical cell connected to the pool's filtration system. As the water flows through, an electric current changes the chloride part of the salt to chlorine, and as the chlorine kills bacteria and algae in the water, the elements re-form as salt. Chlorine production is monitored by a control panel that maintains the proper level.

John Payne, president of the Arkansas chapter of the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals, says saltwater chlorination has been around since the 1970s. The technology originated in Australia, where salted pools are the norm.

Upfront costs are higher with the salt system, but the big selling point is easier and less frequent routine maintenance, he said.

Payne recently attended a seminar in Houston with a panel of industry experts. "Some of the big names in the pool business mentioned the fact that salt was going to be the coming thing, and a couple of them that aren't currently making salt generators have plans in the works to make them," he said.

Suzanne Barrows, spokesman for the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals in Alexandria, Va., formerly the National Pool & Spa Institute, said saltwater chlorination is growing in popularity everywhere in the country. The association doesn't know how many of the estimated 170,000 in-ground pools built in 2004 use the technology, but Barrows' guess is a lot. "More and more of our

members are offering that type of system to their customers," she said.

Payne, who owns Arkansas Pools & Spas in Jonesboro, said he plans to convert his own in-ground pool's traditional chlorination system to a saltwater chlorination system this summer. "It's just a lot more convenient than having to add the chlorine all the time, and you don't have to shock the pool like you do with regular chlorine systems," Payne said. "You're not having to transport a noxious chemical back and forth from your pool place to your home, and you're not having to store a dangerous chemical in the garage."

Shawn Snell, a sales representative at Luther Stem Pools & Spas in Fort Smith, said people come in the store daily to inquire about the systems. "We are putting on at least a couple of units a month," he said. "As it's getting busier, we'll probably be putting on three or four units a month."

Luther Stem Pools & Spas began selling and installing the units last year, Snell said.

Aloha Pools & Spas in North Little Rock also began offering the systems last year. Aleatha Sledge, an employee at Aloha, said the business has sold about 100 units this year. "Every new pool this year, I believe, has had one on it," she said.

Sledge has used the technology on her in-ground pool since September. "It is an awesome system. It keeps you from ever having to handle chlorine. You don't have to buy chlorine or stock chlorine," she said.

Snell with Luther Stem Pools & Spas said some consumers get the wrong idea when they hear about saltwater pools. "People hear saltwater pools and think of the ocean," he said. "You really don't know you're in saltwater. It doesn't really taste like salt and it doesn't smell like salt."

The salt naturally softens the water, Snell added, making it softer on the skin.

However, if the salt level gets too high in the water, there can be a "little bit of a salty taste," Aloha's Sledge said.

Sledge expects her saltwater chlorination system to pay for itself based on savings from not having to buy chlorine anymore. Most of the manufacturers of the systems advertise the same money-saving concept.

But Payne and Snell said the selling feature of the saltwater chlorinators is convenience, not saving money. Both said it would take

chlorinators is convenience, not saving money. Both said it would take years to see any cost-saving benefits.

The units cost at least \$1,000, compared with about \$200 for a traditional water chlorinator. Then, too, 800 pounds of salt is needed to start the conversion process in a typical 25,000-gallon backyard pool, at a cost of about \$100.

After the initial outlay, routine maintenance is cheaper for a salted pool. A traditional water chlorinator requires refilling once a week, and a pool owner typically would spend about \$400 a year on chlorine.

Salt replacement is much cheaper. Salt isn't lost through the chlorination process, but some is lost to splashing and filter-cleaning, and rain causes dilution. Most saltwater chlorinator manufacturers say additional salt, sold in 40 or 50 pound bags for about \$5 each, will need to be added to the water only two or three times a year after the initial setup.

Snell noted that some of the saltwater systems' electrical cells are only warranted for five years. "After five or six years, you may have to replace the cell, which is a big component of the salt system," he said. A replacement cell is around \$500.

Payne, however, said people generally will spend money for a convenience, especially the task of maintaining clean and safe water in a swimming pool. "That's really what people want," he said. "They want to make it as trouble free as possible."

Similar saltwater chlorinator units are also made for aboveground pools, spas and hot tubs.

JUST ADD SALT

SALT WATER RETURNS TO THE DESERT

TEXT PAMELA WHITNEY

There's an underwater bubbling in the world of swimming pools. More and more people are switching to saline pools, and once they've swum in them they would never again be without their salt water.

My childhood memories of saltwater pools emanate from The Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, Florida. Floating on the top so easily was glorious and my buoyancy felt magical. In those days they literally piped the ocean water directly into the pool. Well, today's saline pools are very different. They are technologically state-of-the-art, resulting in the healthiest, and most ecologically safe pools in the marketplace. With a saline pool, there are no red eyes, no itchy dry skin, no salty taste, no green hair, no unsafe chemicals, no harsh chlorine smells, and no need to rinse off after your swim.

California Pool's expert on saline pools, Steve Pyle says, "We design and build about 600 pools a year and about 50 percent of our clients are requesting saline pools. Once some-

one has swum in a saline pool they wouldn't swim in anything else. The prospective buyer's biggest concern is that chlorine kills bacteria; once they learn that the saline system pro-

duces chlorine, which kills bacteria, they want to install a saline pool for all the many other benefits it provides."

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systems," he says. "In fact about 90 percent of all the pools we currently put in are saline."

"The water in a saline pool," he points out, "contains about 10 percent of the salt that

is in a teardrop. Not only is it gentler to the eyes, the water feels better on the skin.

Jerry Pelton, of J.P. Pool Service, has seen many teenagers come and go in his years running a pool service, and at first he was skeptical. "I thought it was a lot of malarkey," he admits. Then he was persuaded to try one out for himself and his attitude totally changed. "You can really feel the difference on your skin," he declares with enthusiasm.

One client of his has a teenage son who suffered from acne. When he switched to a saline system the boy's skin

improved so dramatically that the dermatologist asked why the difference had come about and declared he didn't need to come back for treatment. Teenage skin is a temperamental and unpredictable thing but Jerry is convinced credit belongs to the switch from chlorine to saline. "With a chlorine pool," he points out



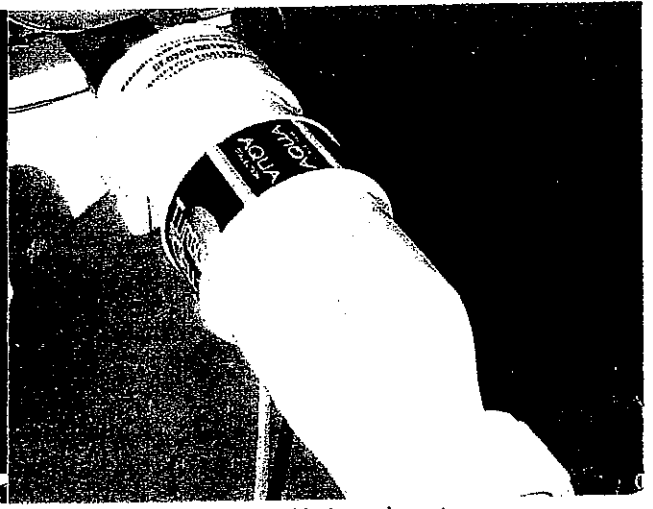
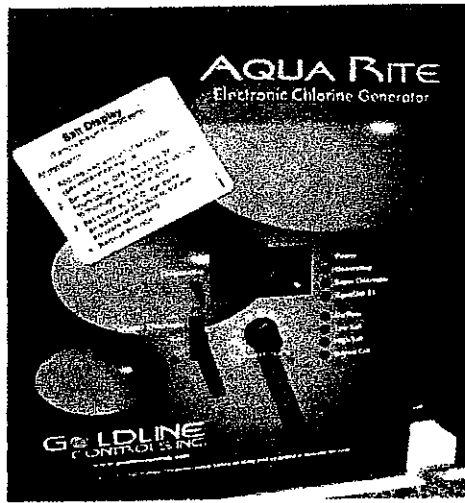
Photo: Chris Horn

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parison of a saline versus chlorine pool easily demonstrates that the saline pool is less yellow and has a much higher sparkle factor.

Certainly a saline system significantly reduces those hard, crusty, unsightly calcium water lines. Cleaning those has been a problem. "The current method," Horn explains, "is one where guys out here are generally using glass beads, and bead blast the tile edge or patio, using a compressor, pot and hose to blast off the minerals. Those little glass beads would shatter and shoot everywhere — into the pool, flower beds, grass — and would still be in there years later. Not only were they dangerous and not biodegradable, they were able to be ingested and thus unsafe for dogs and possibly small animals and children." Wow! Who knew?

Horn himself now uses the same process and products used to restore the Statue of Liberty a few years ago, which were not only safe but didn't destroy the statue's patina:



The difference between a chlorinated-water pool and a saline pool is the equipment. Above are the control panel and the chlorinator cell for a saline pool.

biodegradable sodium bicarbonate or common baking soda (like those yellow and red Arm & Hammer boxes we forget to change in our refrigerators), only it consists of a much coarser grain, which Arm & Hammer manufactures for commercial purposes. When he uses the new product with a compressor to break up the minerals on patio decks and pools, it neutralizes as it travels down the drain. No unsafe chemicals in your pool, grass or flowerbeds!

I came to the desert from the east coast and when you cleaned your water line, it came off with a spray bottle of Simple Green, a stiff brush and a little elbow grease. I never knew that calcium buildup could be such a challenge here. But the good news is, once yours is cleaned, hopefully the environmentally safe way, the saline pool process substantially decreases the mineral water line, especially on Pebble Tec pools.

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Who wants to worry about all this stuff? We just want a beautiful, sparkling clean, healthy pool, especially now that we are able to enjoy our pools again without having to pay a king's ransom to heat them! I've learned there are two kinds of pool owners, those who really love to swim and those who just like to look outside and see a bit of sparkling water in the desert. Saline pools appeal to both groups. Gazing into my crystal ball, I predict that we will see more people in the Coachella Valley retrofitting their existing pools with saline equipment. I also predict that builders, as an incentive and additional amenity, will provide it as standard equipment to prospective new home purchasers. Either way, everyone wins.

Best of all, when you are splashing and floating around, you can rest assured that, not only are you in a healthier pool, but also in some small way you are helping the environment. ■



Pamela Whitney is president of Whitney Interiors in Indian Wells.