

pond people

LIVING THE POND LIFESTYLE

From Across the Pond

Pond Building Helps Irish Immigrant Realize His Dreams, Here and Abroad

BY VAL ADOLPH

“left Ireland in hard circumstances,” Gerard Touhey says. “My mother gave me \$400 to last me six months. There was no crying. I was just told ‘Good luck. Do the best you can.’ I arrived in New York in 1988 with the clothes on my back and one small suitcase.”

Gerard had no idea what to do, but within 48 hours he had his first job – house painting in Short Hills, New Jersey. Then he met Martina, also from Ireland, at an Irish step dancing class and asked her for a date. Within a few weeks he proposed to her – in a helicopter over the Statue of Liberty. They were married in 1990 and now have two children, Colleen and Graham. Since then, Gerard has had many jobs and has become a US Citizen. But building ponds would be the one that made him most happy.

The Koi That Wouldn't Wait

He came to pond construction because of the koi that wouldn't wait. He had bought a 60-gallon fish tank and filled it with what he thought were goldfish. They were koi. And while a few died, others grew so big so quickly that the tank gave them no room to move around. His wife hated to look at the poor, sad, penned fish, so he decided it would be best to take the largest one to the Delaware River and release it.

The fish just lay in the river, hardly moving and, upset at what he had just done, Gerard drove away. Suddenly he had a brainwave. “What if I dug a hole for it in the back garden?” he said to himself. Immediately he turned around and drove back to see if the fish was still in the same spot.

It had disappeared by that time, of course, but the idea remained with him. He went home, upset about the koi still, but excited, and started digging a hole in his garden. It took him five days to dig a hole 10 feet by 16 feet, two feet deep. While this made a decent-sized pond, Gerard still had no idea what pond construction was all about.

He bought a pond liner to prevent the water from leaking away, bought a pump and a length of pipe, and put rocks around the pond. After the pond was done, he added some plants to make it look natural.

Without even knowing what he was doing, he had produced a pond he could be proud of. Only later, with training and experience, did he realize that ponds could be made to look even better than that.

Putting in Ponds is Addictive

Four weeks later, a woman from the nursery where he had bought the plants dropped by. She thought the pond was amazing and asked if he built ponds for a living.

“No, I'm just an interior decorator,” he answered. “Well, you're a natural at it,” she said. “Go get some business cards.”

Gerard began to realize that putting in ponds was addictive. The more ponds he built, the more he wanted to design and create. He went to a store and bought components to make another pond for his garden.

Later, he met a man who installed swimming pools and he gave Gerard a magazine that had a picture of a pond in it. It looked almost like the pond Gerard had built, so he phoned Aquascape, the name on the catalog, and ordered \$5,000 worth of components. A week later, a huge semi drove up his little street and the driver unloaded three pal-





▲ The water appears to flow under the deck. It's an illusion, but you can sit on the deck and dangle your feet in the water.

lets full of pond equipment. He had no place to store it. All he could do was cover it with a tarp.

That was the beginning of a new career for Gerard Touhey. From there, his pond building business grew by word of mouth. People came by his house and saw his ponds and wanted one just like them for their own garden.

Now the Touheys have one open house weekend a year for people to take a closer look at their ponds. As a rule, it's in June, when the garden clubs have their tours.

Ponds at the Touhey house

The Touheys' house sits on a lot that's about 150 feet by 80 feet. At the moment, it has three ponds and two Pondless® Waterfalls. One pond is 40 feet by 30 feet. Another pond, called the shubunkin pond, is about 50 >





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< feet long and about 20 feet across at the widest point. It was built mainly using Pennsylvania fieldstone and big round boulders. It has two waterfalls; one big one is about three or four feet above the pond. The other waterfall is just above the water. You can walk down a little path to the deck, and the water appears to flow under it. It's an illusion, but you can sit on the deck and dangle your feet in the water.

In front of the house is a four foot by six foot micro pond for goldfish, as well as two Pondless® Waterfalls. One they call Betty's Babbling Brook – it has a full stream twisting around and disappearing into gravel about four inches before it would meet the concrete of the driveway. The other waterfall has a sheet of water crashing down onto gravel.

The Touhey family loves their ponds – they recently renovated their house so when visitors come in the front door, they can see right through to the water. The family enjoys the water year-round. The two children often like to swim, but on lazier days, they can just sit and watch the fish.

“I come home from work in the evening and I walk over to the pond and sit down. I look at the time and it's 45 minutes later, and I've no idea where the time went. It's a great de-stressor.” *Touhey customer, Nick Mares*

▼ One of the first water features Gerard built in Ireland was at the Acorn Lodge, a bed and breakfast owned by his cousins, Margaret and Jim Kells, in County Laois.



“I love the graceful movement of the water and the peaceful sound it makes. It brings peace to the frenzied world we live in.”

Touhey customer, Joie Galiano

Learning Pond Construction

To learn Aquascape pond construction, Gerard attended “Pond College,” held by Aquascape in Chicago. “They’re the most natural looking ponds I’ve seen; very low maintenance, minimal work, endless enjoyment.” Gerard says. “They’re lovely and clean. Most people think of ponds as murky green tubs. They have no idea they can get something so simple, natural, and easy to install. They never look man-made.”

Gerard keeps changing his ponds around. After about four years, he rips them out and installs new and different ponds. It’s a lot of work to get them looking just right but he says, “You have to get it right, like a painting, so an expert can look at it and know it’s right.”

That First Pond Totally Changed My Life

Gerard believes that building his first pond completely changed his life. It gave him a totally new direction. Now he puts in about 20 ponds a year – about 10 in the U.S. and 10 in Ireland. “Building ponds in Ireland is much different from building them in the U.S.,” he says. “Here they want

you to have the pond finished in a day if possible – they want you in and out quickly. In Ireland it’s different, much more laid back. They’re happy if you show up and have a cup of tea with them. If it took a month to build the pond, it wouldn’t upset them. It might take a week – I wouldn’t dream of doing it in a day; it’s against their way of thinking.”

The first water features he built in Ireland were for friends. One of them happened to be the principal of the local school, Ballacolla National School in County Laois, and he loved the sound the water made in his garden. He asked if Gerard would put a water feature in for his school. It’s a small school, with about 50 children, but everyone turned out to help install the Pondless® Waterfall. “The kids were so excited,” Gerard says. “They said it made the school nice; it made it special.”

A Fulfilling Dream

For Gerard, pond building became even more fulfilling when he was recently able to buy land in Ireland. “I now own a tiny little piece of Ireland,” he says with pride. This is an emotional thing for him; something that was beyond his wildest dreams not so very long ago. It is charged with very deep meaning. Gerard Touhey has given so many people pleasure with his water gardens; now he himself is rewarded. 🌻

~Val Adolph is an award winning writer who gardens and ponders in the Pacific Northwest.