Steven Katz says pool-to-pond conversions are fulfilling.

In-ground opportunity

Transforming unused swimming pools into living pond environments has presented an exciting opportunity for this Pennsylvania-based company.

STEVEN KATZ HAS worked in the pond-building, -refurbishing and -management business for more than three decades. During that time, some projects have stood out as especially unique. Take, for example, the project where the homeowners wanted their unused swimming pool turned into a pond. While such a project is a massive undertaking, Katz has found it can have amazing results.

When customers browse the website for Land & Seascapes in Aston, Pa., the page opens with a video of what looks like a beautiful, naturally occurring pond, complete with plant life and fish. They're surprised to learn that the pond had a former life as a swimming pool.

Pools need to be filled in to allow for a proper pond environment.

"In the Northeast environment where we're based, swimming pools don't exist well here," Katz says. "A lot of people have them put in but they soon realize that they only get, at most, three months of use out of them. Then they're staring at an unsightly cover for eight months." Many homeowners tire of that, Katz says, adding that Land & Seascapes saw an opportunity to transform underutilized pools into year-round features.

It may seem that already having a pool dug out would make pond installation easier, but transforming a swimming pool into a pond is more complex than starting a pond from scratch, Katz says. Pools are too deep to allow for a thriving pond environment, so they need to be filled in before the process can even start.

"We're basically building the pond backwards when we're starting with a swimming pool, because we're doing a lot of the work from the underground up," Katz says. "Starting from scratch is a blank canvas, and that's easier to work with."

The result is a pond that homeowners can actually wade into. "Many of our clients grew up with lakes, streams and ponds and they like the idea of swimming in clarified water surrounded by a few fish and some lovely plants," Katz says. "The clarity of the water is beautiful and naturally maintained."

The profit opportunity from a swimming pool conversion is much bigger than that of a typical garden pond. Projects start at about $150,000 for the conversion, a water feature and landscaping. But the amount of time, manpower and overall troubleshooting involved makes it a much more complicated process. Because of the cost and scope involved, the company doesn't do many pool conversions—to date it's done five—but Katz says the conversions are fun despite their challenges.

"One of the challenges is access," Katz says. "This requires big machinery. We need a good 8 feet to 10 feet of access just to bring in the machinery and transport our materials."

To make homeowners aware of that, Land & Seascapes markets the concept in display ads and on Google AdWords. It also wants potential clients to consider its other service—installing a "swim pond environment" from scratch as an alternative to standard swimming pool installation.

Katz is doing his best to spread the word that swim ponds have as many benefits as swimming pools. "We want homeowners to know that they don't have to live with a pool they don't want," he says.

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

»SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Land & Seascapes

OWNER: Steven Katz

YEAR FOUNDED: 1980

YEAR OF FIRST POOL-TO-POND CONVERSION: 1991

LEARNING CURVE: "The best experience is gained over the course of building hundreds of ponds and pond environments while working hands-on with my crew at many job sites," Katz says.

EQUIPMENT INVESTMENT: Pool conversion projects definitely required an investment in additional equipment, says Katz. The list included: skid-steers, track hoes, buckets with thumbs, several types of hydraulic equipment, vibratory sheep's foot rollers, jumping jack and pressure plate tampers, over-sized mechanical hand tools and more.