

Canadians are finally taking the plunge into the Aussie answer to the perfect pool, writes **MARY HATT**. Salt chlorination systems make the water as soft as human tears and just as easy on the eyes

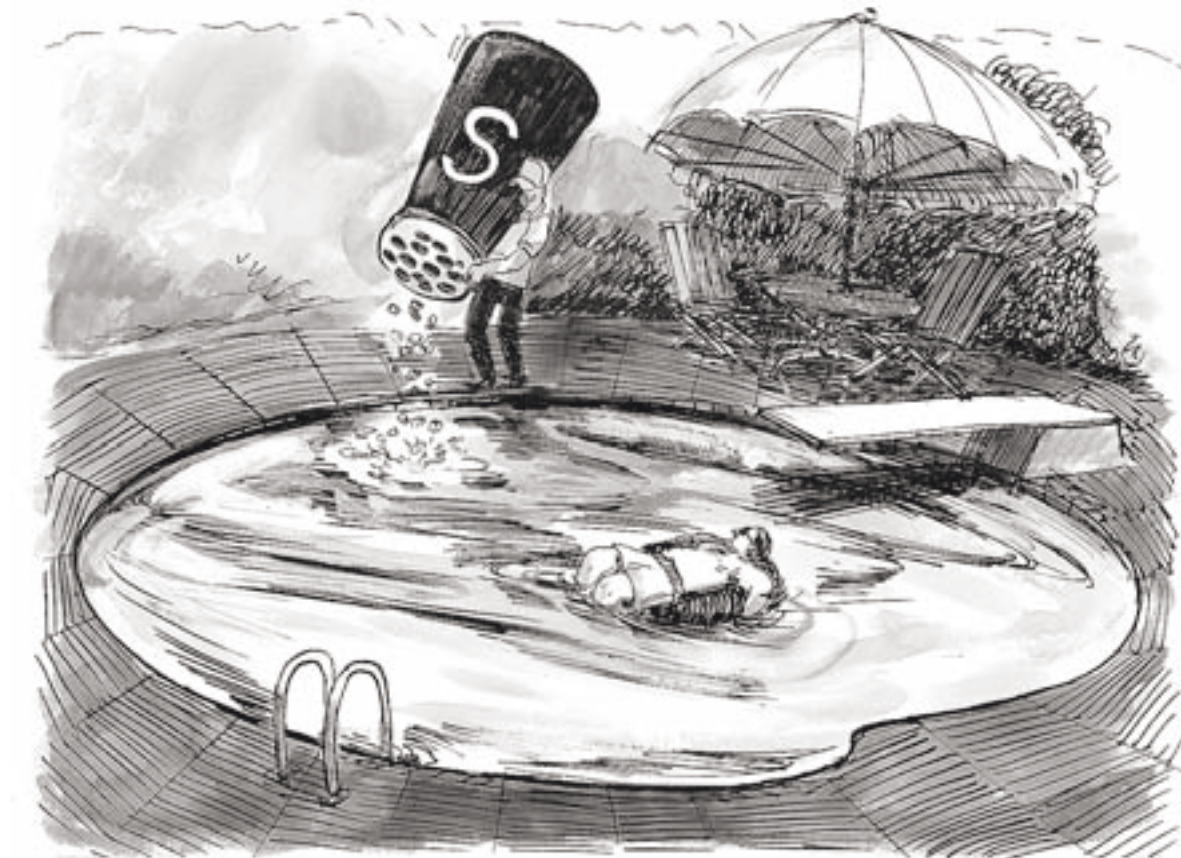
The saline solution

Three March breaks ago, we were a jet-lagged family putting down in Cairns, Australia. Squished up in economy class, the six of us had just endured 24 hours of interconnected air travel from Toronto. Stress turned finally to bliss, however, with a plunge into the shaded pool at our resort in Palm Cove in northern Queensland.

Within seconds, we were all jabbering about the silky softness of the water. We quickly got the skinny from a fellow guest: Like the majority of pools in the world's biggest swimming nation, this one was chlorinated the natural way — by salt.

Fast forward to last spring. Back home in London, Ont., we were putting in our own pool and hadn't forgot those magical few days splashing around in Palm Cove. If we couldn't put the tropical lushness of northern Queensland into our backyard, at least we could have the same kind of swimming pool. A salt chlorine generator was going to cost about \$2,000 more than a conventional chlorine system. But with the cost of chlorine pucks and other chemicals (about \$250 a season, \$600 if you use bromine), we figured we'd get that money back.

Charlie Mousseau, whose Calgary company Lectranator Systems distributes a salt chlorination system across the country, says Canadians are finally buying into what the Aussies have known for years. At a recent Vancouver meeting of dealers, interest was huge. "There were about 100 people there and I asked for a show of hands as to who had installed or had inquiries about salt systems," Mousseau says. "Everybody put their hand up. But you know, 25 years ago when we first started into this, people looked at



GRAHAM ROUMIEU/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

me like I was a snake oil salesman." Until you've experienced a saltwater pool, your first image may be of pungent sea water that can make you sick to your stomach and stick to your skin. Instead, pool water cleaned with salt has a concentration of only 3,000 parts per million, compared to 35,000 to 50,000 ppm found in the world's oceans. Some liken it to the saltiness of human tears. For this reason, there is only the mildest of mineral tastes and the water is velvety smooth. There is no chemical smell of chlorine and you don't risk getting out of the pool with your eyes stinging and your skin itching.

While the system is catching on in the new pools market, Mousseau says the majority of his installations

are in retrofits. The conversion cost is approximately the same as putting one into a new pool, anywhere from \$2,500 to \$3,000.

Aleck Harasym, president of Aleck Harasym Homes in London, installed a saltwater pool when he built his own home a few years ago. Now many of his clients are asking for the systems for both new pool installations and retrofits.

"It is a very strong trend," says Harasym, who was initially sold on salt chlorination by the water quality — his two young daughters can splash around for hours without after-effects like bloodshot eyes. It's also much easier to use, he says, than a conventional system.

Back in the late seventies, when Mousseau imported his first salt

hours at night. It is absolutely painless."

Alex Rozhko, who says his London business AR Pools will see a 25-30 per cent increase in salt chlorination installations this year, also extols the ease of the system, which involves dumping about 100 kilograms of specially graded salt (it sells for \$15 per 20 kg bag) into your pool each spring. As the water passes through an electrolytic cell housed in the recirculating unit, the salt is broken down into pure chlorine and sodium hydroxide. The chlorine gas dissolves instantly in the pool water, killing bacteria and algae.

"We never get calls about green water or how to balance the water," says Rozhko. "And my customers enjoy the water because it so nice. Because it is soft, it's good for kids."

Since the system recycles the same salt over and over, you don't need to replenish it the way you do chlorine pucks, for instance. Instead of going through the weekly chore of adding the right combination of chemicals to your pool, or paying someone else to do it, you might have to top off the salt only a few times during the season, depending on how much your pool is used.

Mousseau encourages his pool dealer clients to compare the idea of a salt chlorination system to one of a household's most essential appliances.

"If your dishwasher breaks down and you tell your wife you are not going to get another one, you're dead. It's just not going to happen. Well, I compare the salt system to having a dishwasher. If you've had one, you could never go back to a system that uses conventional manmade chemicals."

Special to The Globe and Mail

Pass the salt

You don't have to put in a brand new pool in order to enjoy the benefits of a salt chlorinator. It's as easy as a couple of hours and usually no more than \$3,000 to have a pool company retrofit one into your existing system, whether your pool is in- or above-ground.

Most retail pool outlets now sell some version of a salt unit. Once the correct amount of salt has been added to the pool, the chlorinator, tucked neatly into your pool-equipment area, begins to recirculate the water. It breaks down the salt into pure chlorine and sodium hydroxide. Once the chlorine has reacted, destroying organic contaminants, it returns to the form of dissolved salt, ready to be converted again.

Robin Reed of Reed Pool in Toronto says about half the salt units he sells a year are retrofits. "When we got into the salt units seven or eight years ago, our first year I think we sold one or two," says Reed, who has authored several books on pools. "Now we are selling 80 a year. The demand from the consumer is so great now that everyone in the industry is being forced to supply some kind of unit. Probably one in four new pools gets a salt chlorinator."

There are a growing number of makes available, including Clormatic, Aqua Rite and Clearwater. Reed prefers Lectranator. "It's one of the older ones," he says. "They've been around a long time and the back-up service is terrific."

For more information on the Lectranator system, go to www.reed-pool.com or www.tabex.com. For information on the Clearwater Salt Chlorine system sold by Zodiac Pool Care, go to www.zodiac-pool-care.com.

— Mary Hatt