

## Through the Lens

**It's almost design contest season. Have you photographed your best aquascape yet?**

By Rebecca Robledo

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**W**ith so much to cram into a day, taking pictures of your best work can fall by the wayside. Yet the simple fact is, you can't win an award — let alone a client — without decent photos.



Whether you're trying to gain accolades, get the bid or stop a Web surfer in his tracks, a good picture should do more than just record what you built, says photographer Scot Zimmerman of Scot Zimmerman Architectural Photography in Salt Lake City.

"Think about it as a photo, not as a project that you made a lot of money on or that had the most expensive furniture," Zimmerman says. "How is it visually going to convey the feeling of the place? If you can capture [that] feeling, you've done it."

Today's high-tech cameras may make things easier, but taking a great picture still requires time, and a lot of trial and error. Here are 12 ways to make the process easier — and get professional-looking photos worthy of your aquascapes:

### **1 Survey the site before shooting.**

Professional photographers either visit the site before the day of the shoot or ask their clients questions about it. At the very least, they'll walk the land before they pick up the camera, says Zimmerman.

As a builder, you've been on the site. But you may still need to refer to the plot plans to refresh your memory about how the yard works and where the various elements are located.

### **2 Avoid shadows.**

Knowing when and where shadows occur will help you avoid them in your pictures.

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You want to avoid shadows because cameras can't handle as much lighting contrast as the human eye, so they will adjust to either the light or dark parts of the scene, either losing detail under the shadow or showing glare on the lit portion.

Dark, shadowy spots get darker and lose detail, while the brightest spots get washed out. This causes the photo to lose subtlety.

Shadows change depending on the time of day and season. Ask yourself: Does the sun sweep across the yard from front to back or back to front? Which elements throw unwanted shadows on the yard — is it the house, fence, trees or some other object?

The answer to these questions will affect whether you take a sunrise or sunset picture.

"If there's a house to the west of the pool, you don't shoot that late in the day. Shoot early in the day," suggests Robert Rattner, a free-lance photographer and photography instructor in Branford, Conn. That way, you'll avoid shadows cast on the pool by a house in the direct line of the setting sun.

Sometimes there are shadows that just can't be avoided, so resign yourself to working with them. Photographer Denice De Luise once had to take a photo of a pool with a large palm tree hanging over it. She decided to shoot at a time of day when the tree's shadows were centered in the water. "In some of the [shots], it actually looks pretty cool," says the owner of Denice De Luise Photography in Cambria, Calif. "It made a very beautiful shape in the pool. Even though there's this shadow, it's very beautiful."

Shooting on an overcast day can eliminate your shadow problems and even make more colors vivid on the photo, says Rattner. But, of course, you lose the blue sky.

### **3 Shoot in early morning or early evening.**



A midday sun emits the harshest light, creating high contrast. Shadows are darkest and glare is highest.

"We always try to photograph early in the morning or [early] evening,"

says Paul Lynam, photographer and co-owner of Fineline Photography in Lancaster, Pa. "It makes the nicest-looking light and is not as contrasty as you would get midday."

Zimmerman tries to shoot either two hours before sunset or two hours after sunrise. This time of day offers the softest quality of light. Some photographers especially like the

period approximately 20 minutes before sunset, or after sunrise, when there is a warm, reddish cast to the light, but there's still enough sun to catch every detail. A note of caution: Shadows can deepen quickly at this time.

#### **4 Shoot into the sun.**

Although most subjects are best photographed with the sun facing them, when shooting pools, many photographers actually prefer the sun to face the camera.

"You do it backward with pools and landscaping — you shoot into the sun," says Zimmerman, who has published five books of architectural photography and contributed photos to dozens more. "It illuminates the water, and the plants become greener and much brighter. It really pops the colors."

However, with the camera facing the sun, there's a high risk of glare in the photo. One option is to purchase lens shades that will help block out the glare, or you can simply use your hand to achieve the same effect.

#### **5 Take photos at different times of the day.**

Some aspects of an aquascape may look better in the morning, while other parts may be at their best in the evening. For instance, if you have a dry-stack stone wall or barbecue and want to enhance the texture, the light should come in at a steep angle.

Conversely, a waterfeature or raised bond beam at the opposite end from the wall, may come out of shadow when you shoot with light at a different angle.

"Sometimes we'll send a photographer out and he'll come back two or three times during the day to photograph the same pool, depending on how the lighting is being cast around the trees and landscaping and structures around the pool," says Bill Brinegar, the member of California Pools' executive board who oversees photo shoots.

#### **6 Eliminate clutter.**

Clutter in a picture looks much worse than in real life. So be sure to clean up any stray leaves or obstructions in the water.

Next, check for eyesores that you can't move, but want to avoid when shooting, such as telephone poles, a less-than-attractive fence or even construction next door.

#### **7 Move things around to create the best scene.**

Homeowners place potted plants and furniture where it makes sense for their convenience. But that placement doesn't necessarily make sense for the images you're preparing to shoot. For instance, there may be a big span of empty deck that throws off the balance.

"We will sometimes find the photo we want and move

different items into it,” says photographer Lynam. “If we don’t like where the patio furniture is, we may move it, and we may move some planters into the frame.”

Some photographers get even more detailed. “I’ll bring my clippers,” De Luise says. “We’ll snip a couple leaves here, cover a patch of dirt there.” If she finds an empty dirt area, she may cover it with grass clippings or flowers so it looks like part of the garden.

Zimmerman generally prefers furniture to plants in a large space. “People always relate to a pool as playtime,” he says. “So it’s furniture, a cool drink and hanging out with your towel.” Besides, he notes, some heavy potted plants can be difficult to move.

## 8 Style the picture.

Photographers consider “styling” the site to be a large part of their jobs. This involves using a variety of tricks to create the best images.



Say a table will be part of the picture. Regardless of whether you had to move it there or not, put something on it so that it doesn’t look bare. Place settings, glasses or candles all make it look like an interesting, lived-in space.

Sometimes Zimmerman will use artificial framing to add extra drama to the image. To do so, he cuts branches and flowers and attaches them on a light stand, or ladder, so they seem to hang over the camera. You can get the same effect by framing the photo with potted trees or trellis vines. This technique can hide obstructions, too.

“I’ll also place potted plants or potted flowers in the foreground if there are bare spots [in the landscaping],” Zimmerman says. “Quite often I’m asked to do photos weeks after the landscaping is completed, and it hasn’t had a chance to grow in yet. So you have to fill in a lot. But you have to be really careful when you add these things, that you balance it so it looks good with what’s already there. You can’t overdo it.”

As a final touch, consider wetting the deck. This technique makes sense for lighter decks in particular. Wetting the deck darkens it and makes it contrast less with the water and other darker elements.

Also, decide if you want the pool water to have a calm, glassy surface or to appear more lively. To create movement, photographers sometimes stir the water right before snapping the photo.

## **9 Take pictures from different elevations and angles.**

People have a tendency to place the main feature of a photograph in the center of the frame. But by doing this, you might miss the top of a beautiful mountain range in the background and catch too much empty deck in the foreground.

This is also problematic when shooting rectangular pools. “We all know what a rectangular pool looks like,” De Luise says. “Don’t just shoot it in this predictable, square way. Pick an angle that doesn’t make it look like a rectangle.”

No matter what shape the aquascape, shoot it from different and interesting angles. You could photograph a rectangular pool from a corner so it doesn’t look like a postage stamp on the page. Or if you want to showcase a waterfeature, take a picture of it in profile rather than straight on, or put it to one side of the photo so the rest of the pool span behind it can be seen.

Use different elevations to create more eye-catching photos. Stand on planters or berms. If a balcony overlooks the pool, try shooting it from there. Or kneel down on the deck for a lower perspective. Getting up high works particularly well for project-wide shots.

“Sometimes we’ll stand on the roof; we’ll be on a wall; we’ll be on a balcony,” Brinegar says. “We’ll bring our own 8-foot ladder with us so the photographer can get up off the ground.” This is especially helpful for getting the comprehensive shot required by so many design competitions.

## **10 Crop the photo when it’s shot — not after.**

Decide which features you want to highlight and the best angles for showing off the pool. Then take the picture to include those, and eliminate unwanted elements as much as possible.

“A lot of times, you have to compromise between the best angle and eliminating those things that are detracting from the photo,” Zimmerman says. “Most of the time, the best angle has got something really detracting in the background.”

Frame your shots to exclude high-contrast areas. “Say you have something that’s bright, but what you’re [showcasing] is a little darker. If that bright thing is a prominent part of the picture, it’s going to pull your eye away, so it’s going to [become] very glaring,” Rattner explains.

You may also want close-up photos that show special features such as spas, waterfeatures or coping details. If you like a specific feature, move in close and shoot only that detail, rather than cropping it from overall shots later. That way, if you need to blow up the image for an advertisement, brochure or article, you’ll have the largest

image possible, and that helps reduce the graininess which can occur when expanding an image.

## **11 Test your compositions with an instant-picture camera, such as the Polaroid Land Camera.**

De Luise's camera has a special attachment that allows her to snap Polaroid shots without moving the camera from the tripod. This gives her an important opportunity to see how well a composition is working before taking actual photos.

Amateur photographers who don't want to spend thousands of dollars on equipment don't have that option, but can try something similar by taking preliminary photos with a separate Polaroid camera. You won't get exactly the same effect because you're moving cameras around, warns De Luise, but you can approximate the same benefit.

## **12 Experiment with shutter speeds and apertures.**

When manually controlling your camera, you can play with film speed and apertures to create interesting effects.

The shutter speed dictates how long a single frame is exposed to light. Some photographers will use slower shutter speeds on waterfeatures. Because the film captures the motion of the water, it will create a blurring effect, which adds a sense of movement.

The aperture of the lens indicates how wide the lens is open for a particular picture. Sometimes the appropriate aperture indicated by the camera isn't the best. The camera may be reading the light from an element you don't want to showcase, or it may have a hard time processing contrasting brightnesses.

To cover their bases, photographers often try a technique called bracketing. They not only shoot at the appropriate aperture indicated by the camera, but also shoot one aperture above and one below it.

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