



## AUTOMATION

# Something old, something new

Appearances can be deceiving.

Take the rustic-looking pool/spa combination (pictured above) that Tom Driscoll, president of Cabana Pools of Houston, recently built to accompany a sylvan brick-facade home in a rural area outside the city.

The simple, 20-by-40-foot pool features a gently sloping, natural rock waterfall, a free-form perimeter with flagstone and rock coping; an elevated flagstone spa; a French-gray plaster interior and a salt-finish concrete deck.

The whole scene looks like it's from another era — a time when natural materials and a craftsman's handiwork meant things were done with care, and slowly.

But actually, said Driscoll, "It's a brand-new home. They built it to look rustic, to look like an older home." And Driscoll designed the pool with the same idea in mind, echoing the styling of the property and neighborhood.

"You don't want to go out there in the country and design something very extravagant with a whole bunch of curves."

In the same way the home belies its modernity, the pool sports the latest in automation technology.

An in-floor cleaning system uses bursts of water to sweep the pool's surfaces, keeping them spotless and the water ready for bathers. A system controller allows the owner to turn on the spa's heater and jets, lights and more from inside the home or elsewhere.

Driscoll found both features to be an easy sell. "This is basically a ranch place for [the customer] on the weekend,

so when he shows up there on Friday evening, the pool is clean for him."

He also wanted to be able to control his pool and spa remotely. "It's an hour drive for him out of town to get there," Driscoll said. "He can call this system on his car phone and instruct it to turn the spa on, so that it will be ready when he gets there."

Another draw was the controller's ability to prevent the system from freezing. The owner can program the heater to kick in automatically at certain temperatures, since Houston has its share of chilly nights in the winter. "If there is a freeze, it automatically turns the system on and rotates the valves from spa to pool every 15 minutes to keep everything from freezing up," Driscoll said.

The project cost the customer approximately \$65,000 — nearly a third of that amount going to the decking and stonework. The in-floor cleaner ran about \$8,000, and the system controller cost about \$2,600, Driscoll said.

Driscoll's average pool, at \$40,000 to \$50,000, tends to be high-end with an emphasis on easy-living luxury. As a result, nearly every pool Cabana sells — roughly 20 to 30 a year — contains automated systems.

Not every builder can aspire to this, Driscoll conceded. Cost can be a difficult hurdle for a builder to overcome.

"When somebody is going to buy a smaller pool, some people can't justify that much expense," he said. "They can only afford the indoor controller, and they will go ahead and clean the pool" themselves.

But Driscoll added that people do get more enjoyment out of pools and spas that have automatic cleaning and controlling systems.

"I talk to so many people who do not have these features, and they do not ever use their pool or spa because it is too much of a hassle," he said. "If it's already clean and it's a matter of touching a button to turn it on, they are going to utilize what they purchased more."