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Today's hot tubs offer built-in entertainment options

BY H.R. JORRITSMA

Today's hot tubs are the ultimate in relaxation, therapy and entertainment.

Ergonomic features, sophisticated massage systems and intricate audio and visual networks considered the norm in hot tub models on the market now are a far cry from the single stream of air pressure considered the ultimate in relaxation a decade ago.

According to Pool & Spa Marketing magazine, Canadians are buying hot tubs more than ever due to the increase in popularity of 'staycations' and owners upgrading their units, on average, every seven years.

Today's hot tubs are made of tough, impact-resistant materials designed not only to weather the elements, but also to look like a sleek piece of furniture that fits into the whole backyard aesthetic.

Updated colour palettes, natural-looking finishes, including some that mimic granite, and a focus on modern, elegant design reflect some of the design trends.

Whether you are buying new or upgrading an older unit, Don Smith of Backyard Pools and Spa in Aurora says there are plenty of models from which to choose to suit your specific needs.

"Everyone in the entire family can enjoy their use and there are barrier-free tubs that don't have a lot of contour seats so it's easy

for the kids to move around," he says, adding specific models can have either no or up to one to two loungers.

Relaxation has gone to full-blown therapy with today's units featuring powerful pumps, adjustable jets and ergonomic designs.

Some models can seat up to nine adults comfortably, contain multiple jets and include therapeutic comfort collars, shiatsu seats and head cushions.

You won't have to play bobbing for spots or musical chairs to gain the utmost comfort from the generous number of therapy jets, which are strategically placed to target major muscle groups such as the shoulders and lower back.

"Zoned therapy that hits all parts of the body is very popular," says Mr. Smith, adding some models contain carpal tunnel jets focused on hands and fingers while jumbo jets, located in the footwell, provide the ultimate foot massage.

Current models have a power output ranging from 2 to 6.5 horsepower. The more jets a hot tub features, the more powerful its pumps must be. The more pumps, the more vigorous the massage.

Carol Salmon of Pioneer Pools in Newmarket suggests people look for the number and placement of jets in a tub as well as the layout. She says today's hot tubs can have as many as

15,000 jets or more focused on either specific stress points or general massage.

Strategic lighting and waterfall features all add to the relaxation factor, including illuminated drink holders, speakers and spa controls, as well as underwater and pedestal lights and digital colour optics.

But it is the entertainment components that are really making a splash.

Tubs including hydrotherapy jets and TV/DVD entertainment systems come at very affordable prices. But Ms Salmon says while manufacturers have added a lot of new features, consumers can end up "paying a lot depending on the extras".

Whether someone is going to watch a two-hour ball game on TV while in the tub during our cold, Canadian winters is something both Mr. Smith and Ms Salmon can't say with any certainty, but they do suggest for people wanting to entertain guests in their backyard retreats, there are plenty of tubs with all the bells and entertainment whistles to fit the bill.

Some higher-end models come with remote control, pop-up speakers, AM/FM/CD Stereo, satellite ready and with MP3 capabilities and iPod docking stations.

Stations are housed in dedicated enclosures with auxiliary input for other MP3 players, which includes quality marine speakers

for the ultimate sound quality.

Regardless of the style and design, both Mr. Smith and Ms Salmon recommend regular maintenance during the fall and winter, especially if you are only using your tub a couple of times a month.

Mr. Smith suggests removing the cover once a week for at least 15 to 20 minutes to "let it breathe", ensure chemical levels are balanced and water level is up in the tub.

He adds professionals in the pool and hot tub industry are also available year-round for any problems that may arise and to perform regular maintenance, such as cleaning the filters or water testing.

The weight of the tub when full is also something to consider, according to Ms Salmon, who says tubs must be on level, well supported ground to accommodate the up to 1,000 gallons of water in a tub, with each gallon weighing about 10 lbs.

Ultimately, however, people should shop around and choose a model that suits their specific need.

"Hot tubs are becoming more popular and common, whether for stress relief or entertainment or a combination of both," Ms Salmon says, adding price points are relatively affordable for what is considered a luxury item.



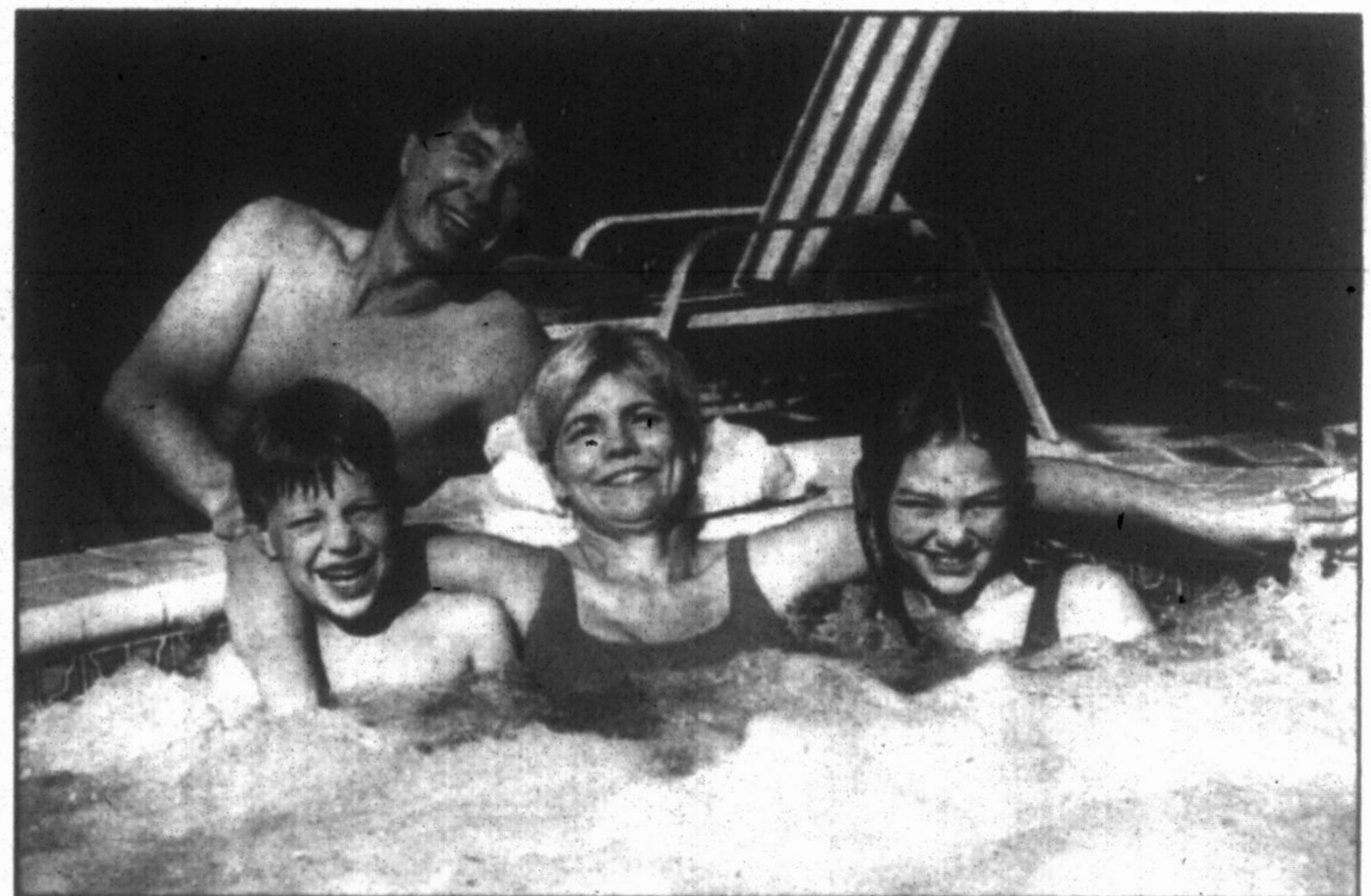
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