

Hot tub myths can get you in hot water

BY JAMES AND MORRIS CAREY
The Associated Press

There are some interesting misconceptions concerning spas (hot tubs). First, they aren't "most comfortable" during the summer months or other hot times of the year. We equate water-related recreation with hot days. Spas are water-related recreation devices all right — except they run at high temperatures, about 99 F to 104 F. This makes them most functional on colder days.

Some assume that spas and swimming pools are similar forms of water recreation, but they aren't anything alike. A swimming pool is ideal for cooling down and getting exercise. A spa, on the other hand, is for warming up the musculature and getting a massage. There is not a lot of moving around in a spa. The jet system in most high-end spas is capable of massaging deep into the tissue, reducing muscle aches and joint soreness.

Drinking wine in a spa is a dangerous proposition. Getting the blood to be

slightly thinner in viscosity is a good thing for a short time — as long as the thinning process isn't exacerbated by intoxication.

A spa is a lot less expensive than a swimming pool, but don't be surprised when you end up paying somewhere between \$8,000 and \$13,000. That's what you'll pay for a good one. The key to a good spa is the number of different stations (seats, positions, etc.) it has and how many pumps are included with the unit. Less expensive models have only one pump. Upper-end spas have as many as three for churning water.

Another misconception: "A bench (bed, couch, etc.) in a spa is great for relaxing." Wrong. Some spa companies would like you to believe that you can lie down in water and not float to the top. When you lie down in water, you do, indeed, float. Problem is when you float in a spa you can't enjoy the massage as much. Floating in the water takes you away from the real action — up

close and personal contact with the water jets.

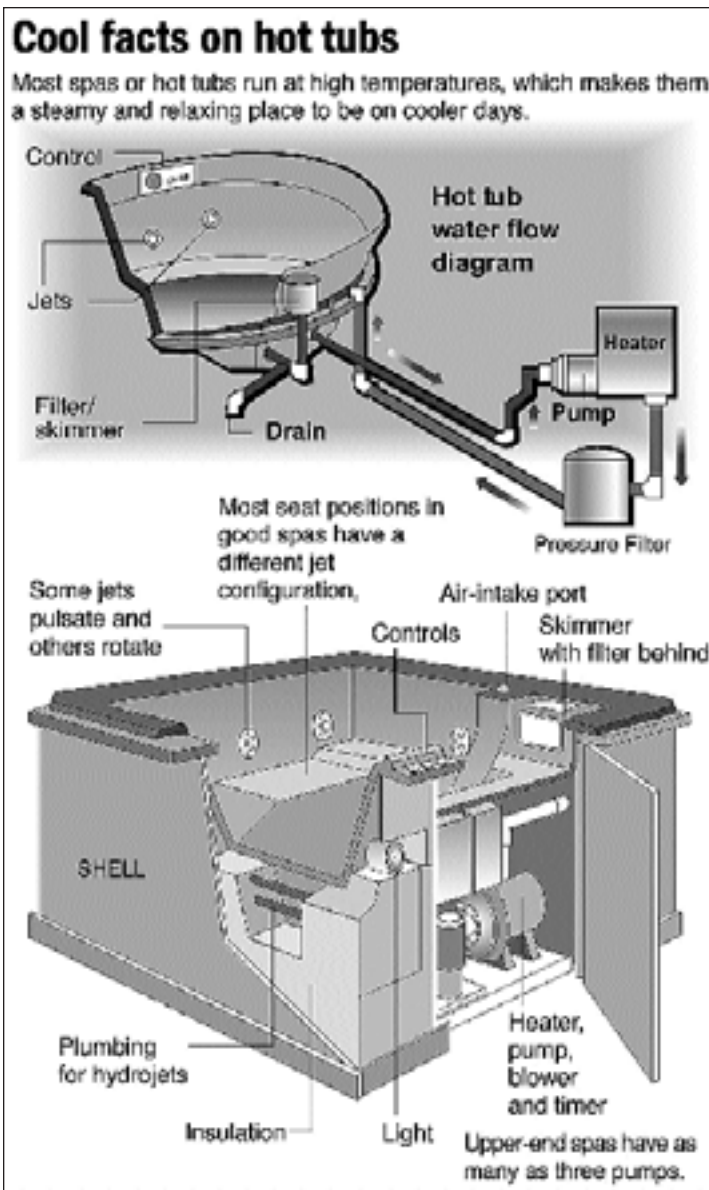
Look for a spa with lots of seating and no bench. Each seat position in a good spa has a different jet configuration, and, therefore, a different massage. And the one most important thing that you will be looking for once you own a spa is variety of massage.

Look closely at what you are getting ready to purchase. One station may be set up for neck and full spine, whereas another might be designed for hips and legs or feet or calves. Look at where the jets are located and study how you will be massaged. Also, look for innovations in jet configuration. Some jets pulsate and others rotate.

Once you pick your spa, you will have to get it installed. You will need 220-volt power if you expect to get a unit that is worthwhile. In our opinion, the 110-volt units are woeful. They take days to heat up and the pump motors are nearly useless. Most spa companies

perform their own installation, so be careful. Make them get a permit. With a spa you are dealing with electricity and water in the same container. You don't want an amateur putting it all together and leaving out an important part — like a ground wire. Getting a permit forces the spa company to be on their best behavior, and, thus, your safety is better protected.

Be sure to get a good cover when you purchase a spa. Better covers will create an air-tight seal and save you on your energy bill. Also, the top should have a lock on all four corners — you can't endanger little ones in your neighborhood. Also, look into a high-quality cover lift. Good-quality covers are heavy and, thus, getting them off of the spa is hard work, even for a burly guy. If you aren't powerful, a cover lift is essential. Be sure that your spa is placed on a level surface. When it comes to construction there is nothing like a good, solid base.



Birds can be entertaining winter guests

BY LYNDA TWARDOWSKI
Special to the Record-Eagle

Looking for some arm-chair entertainment? Turn off the TV and look out your window.

Autumn's dropping temperatures are sending flocks of migrating birds overhead. Some will stop just long enough to rest and refuel, but some will stay all winter.

If you're interested in enticing them to your yard and want to ensure a birds eye view of their entertaining antics all winter long, you'll need to provide just three things: food, water and shelter.

Sound simple? It is, but there's one catch, says Tom Ford, naturalist for Wild Birds Unlimited in Traverse City: You've got to start now.

"It's important to establish feeding stations in the fall, so birds know that the food source is there," said Ford. "If you wait until the snow flies, birds will already be dispersed to other areas."

The first order of business? Water — and lots of it.

"Water can be such a primary draw," said Dee Miller, Northern Michigan Birding member and sightings data administrator. "It's not just the seed."

Birds rely on water for drinking and bathing. Although the sound of running water via a drip hose or small fountain will make your yard particularly exciting to passing birds, any shallow container — three inches deep or less — that holds water will do. Just remember: Winter is drought time for birds. To prevent freezing, Ford recommends using a small birdbath water heater.

For food, you can't go wrong with black oil sunflower seeds, said Ford. They're popular among most all seed-feeding birds, have a high percentage of oil in proportion to their weight, and their small size and thin hulls make them a cinch for even small birds to crack, so birds of all sizes can enjoy them.

"Size does matter in the outdoors," said Ford.

If you want to give a variety of birds a fair shake at feeding, a variety of food and feeders can make the difference.

Larger birds, such as mourning doves and blue jays, tend to camp out and dominate feeders, keeping the little guys out in the cold.

To help the diminutive sparrows, goldfinches and juncos get their share,

Ford recommends offering thistle in an additional feeder, generally a tube feeder cut with small slits. Suet — a hard type of fat typically packed with seeds or nuts and hung in a small wire cage or mesh bag — is great for attracting woodpeckers, titmice and nuthatches.

For ground feeders like white-throated sparrows, white millet, cracked corn or assorted seeds scattered on the ground or in a tray work great.

Plants with berries, such as mountain ash, will entice birds like robins and waxwings, which are less likely to visit feeders.

Before filling feeders, Ford says it's essential to clean out oily seed residue and grime each season with a diluted detergent mixture (he says he's a fan of Dawn dishwashing liquid), then following with a mild bleach solution to disinfect and allowing them to dry completely.

When placing feeders, you'll want to choose or create an area birds feel safe visiting, said Miller. Nearby evergreens and brush piles will offer a roosting spot and protection from predators. Miller said she plops out her Christmas tree after the holidays are over, and the birds love it. However you provide shelter, don't keep

it too close to the feeder, said Ford; squirrels can jump roughly 10 feet horizontally and five feet vertically. Despite even the best-laid feeder plans, squirrels can still be a problem, but sometimes it's just a matter of changing your perspective.

Carolyn Warren, a Traverse City resident whose spacious backyard boasts a dozen bird feeders, said she battled the pesky feeder raiders for years.

"I thought I was going to break the patio door from

banging on it so much," she said.

Eventually, she gave up trying to beat the squirrels and now simply makes certain they have enough seeds and corn on the ground to keep them distracted from the feeders. She admitted that her diversion tactics don't always work, but they help, and in the meantime she can enjoy their antics and her flocks of well-fed birds.

Lynda Twardowski is a local freelance writer.

Want to learn more about local birds?

- Stop at Wild Birds Unlimited at 1213 Front St. on Saturday mornings in October between 9 and 10 a.m. for open Q & A sessions, coffee and tea with naturalist Tom Ford. Call 946-0431 for future dates.
- Check out Northern Michigan Birding's Web site at www.northernbirding.com for articles, sightings lists, message boards, free birdhouse plans and suet recipes.
- Join the Grand Traverse Audubon Club for field trips and lectures. Go to www.GrandTraverseAudubon.org for more information.
- Contribute to Project Feeder Watch by volunteering to count birds at your backyard feeders once every two weeks. Your finds will help scientists better understand population trends and movement of birds and develop conservation programs. Amateurs are welcome. Project Feeder Watch is a joint undertaking by the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology, the National Audubon Society, Bird Studies Canada, and the Canadian Nature Federation. Learn more and obtain an information packet at any Wild Birds Unlimited store.

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