

Gardens: Getting Back to Plastic

At the Cutting Edge of Garden-Furniture Design, 'Synthetics' Are In

By PETRA SCHWAB
HANDELSBLATT CORRESPONDENT

LONG WITH THAT non-indigenous foliage, those rare herbaceous perennials and that costly breed of carp in your biotope, gardeners will be glad to hear there's finally a new, decidedly less-natural line of things to leave out in the rain.

Good garden furniture has to meet two basic criteria: it has to be weatherproof and it has to sell. Wooden deck chairs, wicker armchairs, metal tables and terra cotta pots have long been the favored solutions for designers and style-conscious buyers. The finer the design, the further away it tended to be from the kind of ubiquitous, mass-molded, four-euros-a-pop plastic chairs often found perched on housing-block balconies, at tourist cafes and outdoor concert venues.

Synthetic Twists

But now there's a new wave of outdoor furnishing sweeping Europe that promises to deliver you from the either-or choice between cheap polypropylene and tony teak. Designer plastic — or rather, "synthetics" — is en vogue and even fulfills the basic criteria: it's affordable and doesn't rot. Plus, it carries nifty designer monikers.

The lawn chair christened "Pororoga" from international design group Environmental Design Research Association, or Edra, is made from tightly woven, waterproof strips of PVC. The armchair "Nylon" by Italy-based international design firm Sawaya & Moroni is fashioned from a grime-resistant weave and easily transforms into a recliner. Edra's "Anemone" turns multi-colored rubber tubing into an

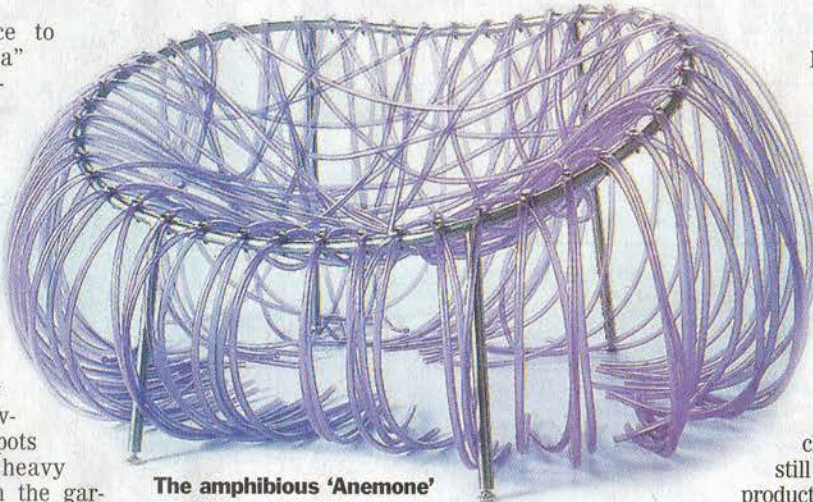
eyecatching place to sit, and the "Dia" chair by Munich-based ClassiCon GmbH, wrapped in waterproof material, turns into an armchair when tipped over.

Even flower tubs are going synthetic, ending the days when having fashionable pots meant lugging heavy earthenware from the garden center to the garden. The colors are still earthy though, even when

departing from traditional earth tones to embrace other muted hues such as lavender gray, Pompeii red or sage green.

One of the busiest star designers of the new wave is Philippe Starck. His name is dropped most often these days as the man designing new interiors for the Eurostar. But ever since he made a splash in the mid-90s with his house ringed on all sides by a patio, he's had a thing for garden furniture, especially the synthetic kind, turning out everything from stools and tea tables to sofas and garden gnomes.

An item in his latest collection may look like an oversized, upended glass vase. But actually, it's a stool. Embedded on the seat of each one is a colorful imitation gem. He's dubbed the faux-bohemian piece of plexiglass "Bohem," pro-



The amphibious 'Anemone'
by F. and H. Campana.

Photo: Edra

nounced with two syllables, like the French "bohème."

No Excuse for Bad Furniture

This new trend isn't just spun from a designer's whim, it's largely thanks to new techniques for processing synthetic materials. Huge machines are



Steely elegance for sun worshippers,
from the "Dia" series by Gioia Meller Marcowicz.

Photo: ClassiCon

now able to cast larger and more-impacted single pieces. And since a greater variety of colors and surfaces are now possible, the term "mass-produced" is no longer a viable excuse for bad furniture.

Leading Italian synthetics specialist Kartell, which has been turning out plastic furniture since 1963, made 10,000 of its polyethylene "Bubble Club" sofas and armchairs in the first nine months of the series' production, which usually means a single molding. "We did three moldings to satisfy the growing demand for this product," according to company spokeswoman Gabriella de Biase. The company said annual unit sales range from around 60,000 of its "La Marie" design up to around 120,000 of its "Dr. No" chairs. That sounds like a lot, but it's still fairly exclusive considering that the products are shipped nearly globally.

But "haute" as this plastic is getting, it's still a lot easier on the pocketbook than non-synthetics. The top end of the price range for a Starck sofa, for instance, is around 700 marks (€358). As with the previous, tackier generation of garden furniture, the bargain price is thanks to the fact that this stuff is churned out in quantity. Kartell exports it worldwide to offset the high production cost. You see, that new processing machinery mentioned before is expensive. Even the cheap white-plastic chairs that designers tend to look down on have to move to the tune of 1.5 million units to swing into profit.

As it turns out, those big numbers are a secret draw for designers, who harbor the secret, non-couture desire to sell as many samples of their craft as they can.

So, don't delay, the trend may not last forever, even if the furniture does.

For more information on plastic garden furniture go to these web sites:

- www.kartell.it
- www.classicon.com
- www.telepath.com/edra/
- www.sawayamoroni.com
- www.jetnet-design.com

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