

GARDENING WITH WATER



Water features add sounds and scents to the sensory experience of your garden and they provide habitat to a wide variety of plants and wildlife. **You don't need a lot of room to enjoy a water garden**—you can set up a wall fountain or a patio-size container in just about any space. Modest-sized ponds can fit into suburban backyards. Even the smallest water garden helps support a healthy ecosystem around your home.

Planning for water gardens starts with considering the costs and demands of installation and maintenance as well as the size. The care isn't hard or excessively time-consuming, but water gardens do require periodic attention. Starting small and increasing your commitment is often a sensible strategy.

Containers

Miniature water lilies, lotus, and many other water plants thrive in **just 20 to 30 gallons of water**. You can set them in an ordinary whiskey-type barrel lined with plastic or a plastic tub that's been designed for a water garden. For the simplest set-up, look for kits that include of the supplies you need (*except plants*).

Ponds

Concrete pools are the sturdiest and most durable set-up, but they also are the most expensive to install and typically require professional contractors. Fiberglass and rubber liners are much more affordable and can be handled by homeowners. Fiberglass is rigid, long-lasting, and best-suited for formal styles. Rubber liners let you shape the pond to fit your space and desired look.

Site

Choose a spot for your water garden that gets at least 6 hours of sunlight a day. Look for a level spot or be prepared to use a flexible liner that you shape to the slope. **Avoid low spots** or areas that accumulate runoff, which can flood your water garden. **Stay away** from large trees that may smother your pond in fallen leaves. If your pond will have a pump to keep the water fresh, you need to plan for access to electrical power.

Plants

Well-balanced water gardens should include floating plants, submerged plants, and edge plants. You can choose from a broad array of options but be sure to avoid invasive species.

Floaters shade the water and absorb dissolved nutrients, helping to prevent algae growth and keeping the pond clear. Among the most popular are hardy water lilies,

which bloom in white, yellow, pink or red and usually survive winter in the mid-Atlantic region. For containers, look for the miniature variety that spreads only 2 to 4 square feet. Lotus, duckweed, and water hyacinth are other floating options.

Submerged plants live and grow beneath the water's surface and consume dissolved nutrients. Underwater foliage serves as a spawning area and hiding place for fish, insects, and other water creatures. Anacharis, cabomba, elodea, and vallisneria are a few of the common choices.

Edge plants sit 5 to 10 inches below the surface of the water or in the moist soil right beside it, providing shelter for frogs and other amphibians. Sedges and cattails, Japanese and Siberian irises, liatris, and ajuga all fare well along the edges of ponds.

Filter or Aerate

Simple water gardens do not need a filtration or aeration system. By choosing the right mix of water plants and removing dead or dying plant matter regularly, you can keep the water and fresh and clean. Green water (*suspended algae*) and hair algae (*long green strands*) are common early in the season until other water plants outcompete them for nutrients and sun. You can buy barley straw products that help control algae naturally.



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Go Fish

Fish can make a water garden more interesting, while providing plants with nutrients (*via their waste*) and reducing the mosquito population. Bear in mind that water gardens with fish require more attention and may need an active filtration and aeration system. The right type and number of fish depends on the size of the water garden. A handy rule of thumb: keep one fish per 3 square feet of surface area of the water. **Too many fish leads to an excess of nutrients that can cause algae blooms.** Fish also require plenty of oxygen. Warm water contains less oxygen than cool water, so a 30-gallon tub on a sunny patio can sustain fewer fish per gallon than an in-ground pond. In warmer patio tubs, you can try tropical fish, such as guppies, instead of cool-water goldfish.

Koi are large, colorful types of carp that are popular for water gardens. They need cool or highly oxygenated water, so they must be kept in ponds with filters and fountains. They are not suited to containers. Koi must be fed at least several times a week. **Be aware that they may eat water plants.** Goldfish are a better choice for smaller ponds. Although they can grow up to a foot long, they are less destructive and usually do not eat plants.

Once established, a backyard pond will attract birds, frogs, toads, salamanders, snails, and insects, such as water striders and dragonflies. They all fit together in a balanced ecosystem around your water garden. If you keep fish, you may need to put netting over your pond to prevent herons, raccoons, and other predators from eating them.

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