



CONTAINER WATER GARDENS

Water features are popular for many reasons. The tranquil ambiance created by the sound of trickling water, the flowing, graceful movements of fish as they circle the pond, the lush plantings and natural surroundings provide a welcome retreat from the hectic pace of daily life. Creatures of all types are attracted to water, and many are welcomed in the residential landscape. Some prey on insect pests, thus reducing the use of chemical insecticides. Some pollinate garden plants. All provide an entertaining insight into the workings of Mother Nature. Birds and other waterfowl, butterflies, frogs, toads (during Spring mating season), and turtles, to name a few, are all potential visitors to the water garden.

Many people feel that water gardening is beyond their capabilities, despite the advantages a water garden can provide. Some are discouraged by the expense and labor needed to install a pond, or feel they lack the knowledge needed regarding pumps, filters and chemicals. Condo owners and apartment dwellers may feel that they don't have the space. Renters cannot make the permanent changes needed to install a water garden. Many feel that water gardens require a major time investment to be properly maintained.

The good news is that water gardening in containers can provide all the advantages of an in-ground water feature, with less cost, physical labor, technical expertise and time required to maintain one. No permanent changes are made to the property – in fact, some container water gardens can be placed on wheeled plant caddies and moved as often as desired. Container water gardening is not limited by the seasons; there are many plants that will do very well inside in a sunny window.

CONTAINERS

There are two basic rules for choosing a container – it must be watertight, and it must not leach any element into the water that may be toxic to the plants and or fish that will live in it. Other than that, there are infinite container possibilities. Birdbaths, tiered fountains, wall fountains, figural garden statuary featuring bowls or baskets, window boxes (make sure there is a center support bracket to prevent bowing if using plastic or fiberglass), hanging baskets, copper boilers, antique washtubs, horse troughs, and large urns or pots all make interesting containers. Lightweight foam urns and pots lessen the weight of the water garden – even better for use on a deck or balcony.

A container can be made watertight with items found at the home-improvement, craft or pet store. Plumber's epoxy can be used to plug drain holes. If the container comes with a plastic plug, it is advisable to use aquarium silicone sealant around the plug. Hanging baskets can be sealed with the same product, or those with a plastic insert can be sealed with a plastic liner – remove the insert, place the plastic to cover the entire inside surface, and replace the insert. For concrete or stone, use concrete sealer or a latex-based masonry water-proofer. There are many urethane sealers on the market to seal pottery and concrete – available as either paint or a spray. Glazed terra cotta does not require the use of a sealer.

WATER

Container water gardens generally have less water volume than the typical pond, so it is important to choose a site where over-heating will not be a problem. The water temperature of a container in full sun all day can easily reach over one hundred degrees – not suitable for plants and most fish. Providing a location with some shade, as well as choosing plants that shade the water surface, will help cool the water. Periodically, add water to replace what is lost to evaporation- use a de-chlorinating product (available at most pet/pond suppliers) if there are fish in the container. Low-volume water pumps, attached to fountainheads or spitters, re-circulate, aerate, and cool the water. In a balanced water garden, properly aerated water encourages the growth of beneficial bacteria, in the soil and water. These bacteria help combat algae growth, and break down fish waste products. There are also bacterial inoculants for ponds and aquariums that help speed the process when setting up a new water garden. For hanging baskets, and small dish or pot gardens, this will not be an issue – just top off the water periodically. There are also small, easy to use, submerged filter kits available for larger containers or patio ponds, generally a good idea to use when stocking with goldfish.

PLANTS

Dwarf or pygmy water lilies are ideally suited to water gardening in containers. Pink-flowered *Nymphaea* ' Joanne Pring, ' yellow-flowered ' Helvola, ' and white-flowered ' Tetragona ' are hardy water lilies that stay within bounds in containers. ' Dauben ' - a pale lavender tropical lily, holds it ' s flowers above the water, and continues to blooming inside during winter if given enough light. Other floating-leaved plants are water poppy, *Hydrocleys nymphoides* - with buttercup yellow flowers, and floating heart, *Nymphaoides peltata* – with fringed yellow flowers. Runners may be separated from the floating heart plant, and floated, un-potted, in the water - where they will bloom – the simplest of all water gardens in a dish.

There are many "bowl" or miniature lotuses that are suited for container gardens. Pink-flowered ' *Momo Botan* ' and rose-flowered *Roseum plenum* flourish in a patio pond, in full sun. Lotus plants are heavy feeders – be sure to push fertilizer tabs into the soil at the beginning of the season.

Free-floating plants provide shade to regulate water temperature as well as interesting surface texture. common duckweed, *Lemna spp*, will quickly cover the water surface. Burgundy and green fairy moss, *Azolla caroliniana* has a ferny structure, and turns bright red in the fall. Water lettuce, *Pistia stratiotes* has velvety, fleshy leaves, arranged in a rosette. There are several varieties/sizes, including a variegated type. Water hyacinth, *Eichornia crassipes* features lavender flowers in full sun, as well as inflated "floats" at the base of each leaf. Both water lettuce and water hyacinth also feature trailing roots that filter the water, as well as provide a place for fish to spawn and hide in.

Marginal plants require moist soil, with up to an inch of water over the soil level. Dwarf papyrus, *Cyperus isocladius*, features spiky green mop heads at the top of slender stalks. Dwarf umbrella palm, *Cyperus alternifolius*, has a similar habit, but the heads are arranged like spokes in an umbrella. Dwarf sweet

flag, *Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon, has narrow, gold and green sword-shaped leaves, fanning out from the root like an iris. Fiber optics rush, *Scirpus montevidensis*, grows in finely textured clumps, with white, bead-like flowers that give it its name. Siberian pink cups, *Baldellia ranunculoides*, has delicate pink flowers on wiry stems. Trailing runners from the main crown soften the edges of the container. The leaves of Water Clover, "*Marsilea spp*" resemble four-leaf clovers. Pennywort, *Hydrocotyle spp*, has glossy, coin-shaped leaves held above the water and white flowers. Water clover and pennywort both come in variegated and solid leaf forms. Copperleaf, *Alternanthera reineckii*, is deep, reddish purple, with tiny, ball-shaped creamy-pink flowers held close to the stem. Siberian pink cups, water clover, pennywort, and copperleaf all perform well in hanging baskets, as does parrot 's feather, *Myriophyllum aquaticum*, featuring trailing stems of blue-green, feathery foliage arranged in whorls.

FISH

An optional element in the container is fish – both for interest, and for mosquito control. Tropical fish are a good choice for containers. Cold water fish, such as goldfish, are stressed by high temperatures. Guppies and mosquito fish (*Gambusia affinis*) come from habitats similar to those found in the container water garden. Mosquito fish eat aphids and other insect pests – so help to keep plants healthy. Both are very prolific, and need to over-winter inside in an aquarium. Many other tropical fish suited to container culture – ask your pet supplier for recommendations.

Container water gardening is a quick, simple, and inexpensive way to start water gardening, but beware – WATER GARDENING IS HABIT-FORMING!