

Water Container Gardening

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A pond and water feature is a lovely and peaceful addition to a garden, and heavy equipment is not required to enjoy water in your garden. Container water gardens are a small scale alternative to a full size pond. They provide a great introduction to the practice of water gardening without the expense and level of maintenance of a permanent pond. Small water gardens do not require special filtration or aeration if properly set up. If things go too bad, you just empty the water and start over.

Container

Your container can range in size from a bowl containing a small water plant to a larger preformed pond shape you put in the ground. Use your imagination to find a container that will fit in your current garden. Is your garden formal or rustic? For a formal theme, use a glazed pot with a liner; a half wine barrel with a rubber or preformed plastic liner works well in a rustic garden. You can even buy a preformed kid's pool and create a water garden with it.

As a start, a container with 15-20 gallons capacity will give you enough room to add interest to your garden and keep maintenance low. Using a container with dark sides will discourage algae growth and will be less noticeable when it does happen.

Location

Consider whether you are going to have your pond above or below ground level. Having your initial pond above ground level will save the effort of digging a hole and then later filling it if the pond does not meet your expectations. The container should be located where it will receive 4-6 hours of sun a day, but careful selection of plants will allow you to put your water garden in a shady area.

Remember that water weighs 8 pounds per gallon, so take that into consideration if you are planning to put the mini pond on a deck. Plan the location well; once the container is filled with water it will be too heavy to move. You will want your water garden where it can be seen and also close to a source of water so you can easily fill it. Expect to refill it regularly during the summer.

Planting

If you are on city water, you will have to initially add a product to remove the chlorine. While regular chlorine can be removed by waiting 48-60 hours, many water districts now use chloramine, which is more difficult to remove. Visit a garden center that sells pond supplies for a product to remove the chloramine from the water. The water that you later add to top off the container does not have to be treated, since you are adding smaller amounts.

Your plants are placed in a separate container in the water. Fill the bottom of separate pots with the heavy clay garden soil so prevalent in our county. Use solid bottomed plastic containers, or mesh containers lined with burlap. Put ½ to ¾ inch of pea gravel or small stones on top of the soil to keep soil in the container. The initial soil will have enough nutrients for one or two seasons.

Some plants such as water lilies prefer to be planted deep in the water, but you will want to raise most pots to just below the water surface. Use upside down terra cotta pots or bricks to raise the pots off the bottom.

Use your flower arranging skills to select the plants for your garden. Some shorter plants, some spiky plants and some different textures will add interest to your display. Smaller lotus and water lilies can add color to your water surface. They prefer full sun. A typical combination would have some plants such as water lilies floating on the water, a mid height plant such as parrot feather and a taller plant such as papyrus to complete your garden. Don't crowd too many plants into a container. Two to three potted plants and some floaters are all you need. For a very small container, one lotus adds a novel addition to your garden.

Oxygenators are plants that are planted on the bottom of the container and mostly stay submerged. They add oxygen to the water and use nutrients, which discourages algae. Examples are Canadian Pondweed (*Elodea canadensis*) or Water Wisteria (*Hygrophila difformis*).

Maintenance

Top the water off every few days as it evaporates. Add a floating BT dunk to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in your water. Do not add any fertilizer initially, and only sparingly when you do; excess nutrients in the water will give you an algae bloom. When it is time, look for water plant fertilizer tablets at your garden center.

Algae are everywhere so don't be discouraged when your pond is green the first three weeks, especially in summer. Algae grow especially well when there is an abundance of nutrients in the water. As your plants grow and pull nutrients from the water, expect to see the algae decrease. Algae will grow faster in warm water, creating shade will keep the water temperature cooler and discourage its growth. Water lilies, floating heart, or any plant that has floating leaves will shade the water. If you get long strands of string algae, remove them by hand and use them as fertilizer in your garden. A good rule of thumb is to cover at least 50 percent of the surface of your water with plant leaves.

As your water garden grows, you will have to trim plants to keep them the proper size for your garden. Do not introduce your cuttings into the native water ways. Some aquatic plants such as water hyacinth and duckweed are extremely invasive and will cause much damage in native bodies of water.

If you get hard freezes, you can treat your plants as annuals and replace them every year, or remove them and store them in a protected area through the winter.

Water music

Adding a small pump to your feature will give you a miniature fountain display and the musical sound of water in your yard. If you want to know more about adding a water fountain, attend the free Master Gardener class tomorrow, Saturday, August 28 on “Container Fountains.” The class is from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. and will be held in the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.