



# H<sub>2</sub>O in the Garden

Trends come and go, but the allure of water in the garden never dries up.

Story and photos by Eric Johnson



**P**op psychologists speculate that a person's favorite body of water suggests his or her fundamental view of life. Ocean lovers seek the great unknown. River lovers favor a steady, yet forward-moving journey. People drawn to lakes love a playground in their own backyard.

Under this theory, gardeners who host a water feature, whether it is a waterfall, pond, container water garden, or even a birdbath, are a highly creative lot. Water elements in the garden establish a world of their own with distinct sights, sounds, smells, and an overall exciting energy.

You can add a splash of water to any garden. Big, burly ponds and waterfalls are fabulous, but there is a water project for any amount of outdoor space, budget, or elbow grease.

## For the Birds

Many gardeners are drawn to birding as much as they are to digging in the dirt. A water source in your garden (especially a moving one) will attract feathered friends. Birdbaths are a simple way to bring water into any outdoor setting. Limitless in design, they are jewelry for the yard. Get one or several to give birds a drink, a chance for a bath, and a way to cool off in the hot weather.

A bath of varying depths of 1 to 3 inches (a rock set in the middle will help) will appeal to a variety of birds and add visual interest. Baths with sloping sides are the most bird-friendly. Try to place your birdbath at least 8 feet from where a predator, such as a cat, could be hiding but have shrubs nearby to provide the birds a place to dry themselves off. Heated birdbaths are also available to give a water source all year long.

## Out-of-the-Box

Retailers have caught on to what gardeners have long known—water improves an outdoor space. Manufacturers have flooded the market with endless varieties of ready-made fountains and bubbling pots. What may initially look artificial or even a little tacky can often be naturalized into a setting with judicious placement and planting.

Sticking to a solid color will help the piece fold into the landscape. Subtle variations in natural (or faux-natural) material are nice, but too many colors draw undo attention to the item and away from the garden.

Providing a backdrop by placing a piece against a wall, fence, hedge, or tall plants creates a sense of structure and permanency.

Accenting with plantings pulls the feature into the landscape. Soften hard edges and cover mechanics and cords with foliage. Surrounding a feature with plants can make almost any piece garden magic.

One of the more intriguing items to hit the stores lately is the Aqua-Rock™ Fountain Kit (available at many area nurseries and garden centers; see [www.aquarockkit.com](http://www.aquarockkit.com)). Basically a water feature in a bucket, the most appealing part of the kit is a pre-drilled boulder (quartzite and river rock) or rock-stack (sandstone) that allows for flexible tubing to be inserted through it to create a lovely, bubbling effect. All

that is required of the home gardener is to dig a hole for the bucket to act as the water reservoir, set the pump in the bucket, snap the top on, cover with decorative rock or wood chips, set the rock element on the top, and plug it in.

## Contain Yourself

Container water gardening is the best-kept secret of the water-gardening world. You can do it on a deck, patio, balcony, or gap in your landscape design. Anything done in a pond can also be done in a container, including moving water, plants, and fish.

Whiskey barrels (they are watertight as long as you don't allow them to dry out), glazed pottery (fill drainage holes with silicone sealant), steel vessels, or anything that doesn't leak, will do. Galvanized steel is reported to leach zinc and is not friendly to fish or floating plants. Twenty gallons with a depth of at least 12 inches is a good minimum size for a healthy, lush container, but you can begin with anything. A floating bunch of water lettuce is striking in a deep bowl on a patio table.

Consider sinking your container into the earth to create a little pond. Durable plastic containers can last for years, even with freezing water. Galvanized steel will work but will quickly fall prey to the elements. Digging out the hole will be a 1,000-calorie-burning workout but is worth the payoff of a nearly instant water paradise. Naturalize the

edge and hide pump cords with creeping plants, rocks, and stepping stones. Create a natural backdrop with larger perennials and shrubs, add a few water plants, and you have created a pond in an afternoon. Keep mosquitoes at bay with Mosquito Dunks®. They are safe for people, pets, wildlife, and fish. Tuck them under a plant to keep them out of sight.

## Water Plants

Water plants are usually what prompt gardeners to dive into water gardening. The four major types to play with include marginals, oxygenators, floaters, and, of course, water lilies.

Showy, yet delicate, water lilies have a tropical appearance and flower in a multitude of colors. Look for the dwarf varieties to fit nicely into your container. Although most bloom for about three days, approximately six hours a day, once established, you are likely to have a steady show throughout the summer. You can practically watch the emerging buds shoot toward the surface of the water on a warm, sunny day. Monthly fertilization, done easily by inserting fertilizer pellets into the potted lilies, does wonders. If you invest in water lilies for your container (they run about \$30 a plant), you can overwinter them in a 5-gallon pail, in a cool (below 55) and dark corner of your basement or garage. In addition to being beautiful, water lilies help control algae by reducing the amount of exposed water surface.

Oxygenating plants also help to reduce algae. *Anacharis* and parrot





feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*) are two popular choices, beautiful and beneficial. It can take up to six weeks for a plant to begin cleaning up the algae; in the meantime, gardeners can perform a gentle flushing of their container, adding fresh water while old water spills out. That said, the best defense against algae is to increase your tolerance of a little green water. Note: To avoid introducing an invasive, water garden plants should never find their way into lakes, creeks, and streams.

Water hyacinth and water lettuce are two favorite floating plants. Stunning and easy to grow, water hyacinth's lanky structure, along with a love of procreating, makes it the wiser choice

for a large water feature. You can keep it in check manually by thinning it out. Water lettuce has a fun, interesting texture with a fresh, green cast that brightens up a shady container. Both will help cover the surface and reduce algae.

Marginal plants love wet feet and will grow happily in a pot near the surface of your water garden. (Adjust the pot using bricks, blocks, or rocks to vary the height.) Cattails, blue flag iris, sweet flag, marsh marigolds, arrowhead, lizard's tail, and sedge add height and texture and help establish a garden community. (For a complete discussion of water plants, see the July/August 2008 issue of *Northern Gardener*.)

## Water Music

In addition to helping reduce algae, the sound of moving water is calming and refreshing, and it transports you to another place like nothing else. It also masks unwanted traffic noise. Nothing beats hearing a water feature before you see it.

There are many ways of moving water, including overflowing pots, sending water up through an old cistern pump, waterfalls, and bubbling attachments to pumps. Submersible pumps are readily available, reasonably priced, and easy to install in containers and small ponds. External pumps are best for medium to large ponds. Generally you will want a pump with a minimum flow rate of at least half of your pond volume. A 150-gallon pond will need a 75 GPH (gallons per hour) pump. A waterfall may require a higher GPH.

## Think Big

If you have a level surface to play with, a pond will elevate your garden to a whole new level. If you go beyond the submerged container garden, you have two choices: pre-formed or flexible liners. Either way, it's a hefty job—get some help or break it down into small steps.

Pre-formed liners seem the easier way to go and they do a lot of decision-making for you, but don't be afraid of the flexible-liner approach. Plot your pond with a rope or hose in the same way you would plot a new garden bed. When digging your hole, strive for a 75-degree angle on the sides. Lay the liner out in the sun to soften it. Add at least an inch of sand at the bottom of the pond. Old carpet pieces on the sides will help protect the liner. After you have roughly positioned the liner in place (leaving at least a 1-foot border to be held in place with stakes or rocks), slowly fill with water, adjusting and manipulating the liner as you go. Rocks and plants do a great job of edging the pond.

Water features are fairly simple set-ups. Like nature, their beauty is not complex, but it speaks volumes to gardeners and garden visitors.

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### Pond Revival

Bell House on Pillsbury Avenue near downtown Minneapolis is the administrative office of Simpson Housing Services, a nonprofit agency devoted to helping people experiencing homelessness ([www.simpsonhousing.org](http://www.simpsonhousing.org)). Behind the office is a two-tiered pond with an external pump and filtration system that the agency inherited when a board member purchased the house for the agency to use. The agency staff wasn't sure what to do with the pond; their talent was helping people, not ponds.

Last year, the agency teamed up with the United Way for a day of getting the pond and surrounding garden back into shape. Invigorating the soil with compost and mulch, digging out overgrown plantings, and filling in with new flowers and shrubs beautified the space. But what to do about the pond? It hadn't run for several years, so it was anyone's guess what would happen when it was turned on. With little to lose, the gardeners plugged in the pump and watched as the top pond began to fill, inch by inch. Soon the water spilled over the staggered stones, filling the lower pond, and water began circulating through the external-filtration system. Within a day or two, the water cleared and the pond turned from an eyesore to an asset.

Although it's far from advisable to leave a pump submerged and water stagnant for years, the Bell House pond experience shows the true manageability, as well as sustainability, of a well-installed water feature.

—E.J.



*Clockwise, from top right:* Water lettuce is an attractive floating plant that adds texture to containers; koi swim in a larger pond; this old-fashioned watering can makes a simple water feature for the deck; the water-fall at Bell House on Pillsbury Avenue in Minneapolis runs perfectly after a pond clean-up project; some water features such as this bubbling pot only require that you add water and plug it in; rocks and shade plants surround a small pond; birdbaths are one of the simplest ways to add water—and art—to your landscape.

*Page 34:* A French laundry tub is packed with water plants, including water lilies, Tk, and TK.

*Page 33, from left:* Hostas and other shade plants are naturals around a water feature; Joanne Pring water lily.