

Water Features for the Yard

One of the most wonderful, cooling noises you can hear during the long hot summer (besides rain) is that of water in motion. If you don't happen to be lucky enough to live near the ocean, a stream or a waterfall, you can create your own little oasis of cool and calm with a water garden. And if you don't want to go to the work and/or expense of creating falling water, even a simple, quiet water garden can make an area feel cooler. You might be thinking that I'm crazy to be writing about how to cool down, this time of the year. But if you do the sweaty part of creation now, once it warms up you can just sit back and relax. A bonus is that even the smallest container of water will attract an amazing selection of wildlife. Birds will visit year 'round, either to drink or to bathe. Dragonflies and damselflies will visit, alighting time after time on the very same tall perch to survey the view. In late winter/early spring, if you're lucky, you'll find California tree frogs intent on mating and procreating attracted to your water garden. In fact, it's raining gently as I write this, and the frog chorus that I'm listening to is so loud I can't hear the rain!

If you have the time, money, and space, your water garden can be dug into the ground and fitted with waterlines and pumps, and feature waterfalls or fountains. But even if you have a really small budget, you can have a water garden with just a little creativity. A whiskey barrel with a liner (so the wood doesn't rot out too quickly) is attractive, rustic, and within many budgets. Otherwise, just look around for anything that holds water. For many years we grew water lilies in the enamel tubs that we recycled out of old washing machines. The smooth white enamel made a great foil for lush green foliage.

Before we move on to the fun part, I want to share some very important warnings. Still water attracts mosquitoes, and they are no fun at all. Either put some mosquito fish (free from Santa Clara County vector control) or perhaps goldfish in your pond, or get some BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) tablets to dissolve in your pond. The other warning is about pond plants. In general, they are extremely easy to grow. So easy, in fact, that some escapees can spread into wild areas and become a serious problem. Please don't EVER dump your pond plants or even the pond water into native streams. There are water plants that cannot be sold in the State of California, and there is a reason for this. Be responsible and don't bring them in by other means. You can learn more about dastardly invasive plants from Cal-IPC.

Finally we come to the fun part of a water garden, the plants. There are four main categories of plants that grow in and around water. 1. Floaters (no soil

needed) 2. Plants with roots planted in dirt in deep water 3. Plants that grow in shallow water or mud 4. Plants happiest in moist soil.

Floaters are things like duckweed (*Lemna minor*), fairy moss (*Azolla caroliniana*), and water lettuce (*Pistia stratiodes*) which I believe are all OK to purchase in California. Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) is a floater that is so very invasive that it's just not a good idea to grow it anymore.

The water lily (*Nymphaea*) is an example of the type of plant that needs to be planted in dirt. A mixture of clay and topsoil works well, and the heavy clay helps to anchor the plants. Don't use a prepared soil mix, as the organic materials usually included will turn your pond water black. The top of the soil that water lily rhizomes are planted in should be about 12" under water. Gravel or small stones laid on the soil surface can help discourage fish from digging up the plants. Hardy water lilies are easy to grow in this area as long as they get at least a half a day of sun.

There are loads of very fun plants that grow well in shallow water or mud. In the pond you can place the containers on blocks to bring them up to the water surface. Grass-like plants include some *Acorus* (sweet flag) and *Carex* (sedge), and pretty much all of the *Juncus* (rush). *J. effuses* 'Spiralis' is an attention-getter with coiled stems going off in all directions. Zebra rush (*Schoenoplectus lacustris tabernaemontani* 'Zebrinus', whew!) has pale yellow bands on dark green stems, and horsetail (*Equisetum hyemale*) has dark bands (at the joints) on bright green stems. For some great flowers, you can grow Cannas, Japanese Iris, and several different primrose (*Primula*) in standing water. And with that, I'm out of space!

~Nancy Schramm
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