

Way to Grow in Orinda

Wishing for a water feature? - Pondering a pond?

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Water features are an increasingly popular addition to many suburban landscapes. A water feature can add a graceful, natural focal point to your garden while inviting more wildlife such as birds, frogs, ladybugs, and dragonflies to visit. Children are also drawn to and fascinated by water. Our son Walker and his friends spend hours along the shore of our own backyard creek, floating boats, skipping stones, catching frogs, tadpoles, minnows, and the occasional crawfish.

Another benefit of adding water to your garden is the calming, almost hypnotic effect of water. Water catches your eye as it reflects the movement and color of the surrounding plants and fills your ears with its soothing songs. In our yard, we have several water features including: a blue, bubbling pot with yellow water lilies; two fountains; and a horse trough full of water plants and fish with an antique water pump flowing into it. This fall, we plan to finally add a pond and waterfall.

Our focus for this article is on water gardens in the form of ponds and waterfalls. Back in 1993, we had the good fortune to meet Greg Wittstock at a national landscaping trade show. Wittstock, who calls himself “the pond guy,” was introducing his company, Aquascape Designs, and his revolutionary pond products and pond building techniques. Since that time, we have used these products exclusively and believe his building methods are the best available.

When people add a pond to their garden, they want it to appear as if nature put it there. There is nothing natural or even good looking about a pond built with a concrete bottom and sides. A rubber liner is the best method for containing the water in your pond, however, a ring of flat stone around the perimeter to hold down the edges of an exposed, black linear doesn't look “nature made” at all.

The Aquascape approach to pond building looks far more natural than any other method we've seen. The pond and waterfall, which cycles the water in and out of the pond, are both lined with a 45-

millimeter black linear, which is then completely covered by varying sizes of rocks and gravel. Aquascape uses a box-style skimmer with a submersible pump in the bottom which is easy to hide at the pond's edge. The filters are located in another submersible box that can be hidden in the waterfall.

The key to installing and enjoying a low-maintenance water garden is to build and maintain it as a balanced ecosystem just as Mother Nature would. This requires a good circulation/filtration system to keep the water flowing and a balanced ratio of fish to plants. The fish and plants both create and compete for the ecosystem's nutrients that will starve any algae out of your pond. It's important to recognize that the presence of fish actually reduces your pond maintenance. The fish contribute to the balance by consuming plant nutrients and bugs and excreting waste nutrients.

A sufficient amount of rocks is also necessary to help reduce algae growth. Lastly, you'll need to add beneficial bacteria (a powder based additive) to your pond on a regular basis. Many pond enthusiasts believe that a UV sterilizer is required to keep your pond balanced, but if you follow Aquascape's balanced ecosystem as outlined above, a UV sterilizer is not needed.

When considering a pond, many of the concerns we hear from our clients revolve around fish and the fear of losing them. However, the varieties of fish that most people put in their pond are very hardy. Koi, for instance, have been known to be passed down from generation to generation in Japan. Both koi and goldfish are extremely adept at finding their own food. In fact, people over-feeding their fish is a much more common occurrence than pond fish dying from starvation.

Pond owners also worry about losing their pond fish to predators like raccoons, herons, and snakes. If your pond is built with relatively straight sides and the depth is at least 20 inches, raccoons are not a problem because raccoons are waders, not swimmers. As for heron, they are the

biggest threat to pond fish in Orinda. Heron can spot a fish meal from 200 feet in the air. Your best defense from having a heron fly off with your fish is using a decoy and/or motion controlled sprinklers. You can also protect your fish from heron by building some rock ledges into your pond which provides your fish with a place to hide from their prey. Snakes fortunately are not a problem as there are no fish eating snakes in our area.

Another big concern people have about ponds is that they will draw mosquitoes. A stagnant pond with no fish will draw mosquitoes and other bugs, as well. A pond with moving water, however, makes it difficult for mosquitoes to breed and the few that do come to visit your pond will become instant fish food.

The first step when planning to add a pond to your garden is to determine your priorities. Will it be a home for goldfish or koi or is your main desire to add the beauty of water plants to your garden? Most people opt for both fish and plant life in their ponds. Perhaps all you really want is to add the soothing sound of flowing water.

If your pond plan includes fish, avoid the number one mistake of making your pond too small. The best water gardens include both fish and plants and are relatively shallow – no more than 30 inches deep. Koi ponds are a little more demanding as they require a minimum of 1000 gallons of water. We make koi ponds at least four feet deep.

Some koi enthusiasts will protest that a pond built with a rock and gravel base, as recommend in the Aquascape method, is unhealthy for the fish. There have been several studies conducted on this topic, and none have shown a gravel bed of less than two inches to be detrimental to koi health. In nature, koi are bottom feeders who root around in the gravel and mud with their whiskers for food. It has been our experience that koi in gravel-less ponds often make it a challenge to have healthy plant material because the fish will uproot the plants by turning over their containers. We have also observed that koi in a sterile pond without a gravel base appear to be bored and listless.

If you desire to simply add the sound of flowing water to your garden with as little maintenance as possible, then a pond-less waterfall would be a great option. Pond-less waterfalls work well where space is limited. Some beautiful bog plants can be grown in this type of water feature as well.

The second step in planning your pond is to decide where it will be placed. Ponds

do not thrive in extreme amounts of shade or sun. If the water gets too warm, you will have problems controlling algae. If your pond is in too much shade, your water plants won't grow. Although it's best to choose an area with some existing shade, adding new plants in and around your pond can help increase the shade to an appropriate level. If you must build your pond in full sun, it's important to cover at least two-thirds of the surface water with pond plants. Another factor in determining your pond's location is the species of any nearby trees. Oak, pine, and redwood leaves all release tannins in water which will result in tea colored pond water.

A water garden could be the perfect replacement for that perpetually brown patch of grass, those ugly shrubs or that high maintenance tree you've been grumbling about. Adding a pond will bring more color, life, and movement to your garden and it will draw you and the kids out of the house and into the yard.

If you have an interest in attending a hands-on pond building seminar, call 254-4797 or email gardenlights@comcast.net.

For more information on koi, check out Dr. Johnson's website at www.mynewpond.com and for more information on Aquascape designs go to www.aquasapedesigners.com.