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Ponds of Dreams

By Sophie Braccini



Turtles, goldfish and koi inhabit Al Kyte's pond in Moraga Photos Doug Kohen

Ponds in Lamorinda gardens come in different shapes and sizes, and with different meanings. They fulfill the universal appeal of water elements in gardens. Some feature fish, others have turtles; some are rectangular, others mimic nature; some are self-made, but most are constructed by professionals; some contain a few hundred gallons of water, while others cover acres. There are ponds for all budget levels, and each seems to bring to its owner an element of peace that is priceless.

"I like the sound of water," begins Moraga resident Al Kyte, when asked why he has a pond; then he continues, "It's a religious thing, it is contemplative, quiet, it helps gain a peaceful perspective, it is quiet resting with God."

Kyte built his pond some six years ago with the help of his son-in-law. He researched the subject intensively and came up with a design that creates movement and a variety of habitats for different animals. He describes his pond: "First you see a waterfall, which empties into a pool of water, then the water bed meanders along the side of the hill. After the second water fall, a shallow path with small rocks creates a bird bath and it finally empties into the main pond where the fish and turtles live."

Constructing the pond was no easy task. The design was laid down, trenches were dug for an electrical system and piping, and the main pond was dug out at two and a half feet deep. Then a heavy liner was set along the bed, rocks were cemented around the whole perimeter, and filtration and pumping systems were installed. "I bought a dozen goldfish and a small koi for the pond," says Kyte, indicating a gold koi that's now over two feet long. "I have male and a female red ear slider turtles as well, and the pond attracts all kind of wild life." Kyte spotted some Western Tanagers and Townsend's Warblers he had never seen before; dragonflies abound, and he has noticed an increased number of butterflies this year.

If there is one thing that Kyte would do differently today, it would be to provide for a larger pond.

Steve Lambert of Garden Lights Landscape Development agrees with Kyte's perspective. Lambert's vision is that ponds can be created as live ecosystems which can sustain themselves. "This pond is 40 inches deep with straight sides so the raccoons can't get access," says Lambert of the beautiful pond he built for his own Orinda property. "It contains many plants that the fish can eat and in turn the plants use the fish droppings." The fish feed on insects and larvae, too, which keeps the pond free of pests. Lambert uses no chemicals in his pond; he just adds bacteria to the water and filtering system. Lambert believes that a pond needs to be at least 60 square feet to be self-sustaining.

Large rocks are set around the edge of his pond and water cascades over boulders that seem to have been weathered by water for millennium. The pond contains several koi and goldfish, and some turtles. The plants are water lilies, submerged anacharis, which remove nitrates and add oxygen to the water, and water poppies. "I feed my fish much less than other people do," says Lambert.

The self-sustaining effect of a well balanced environment was demonstrated recently in the pond of the Creek-Wood family in Moraga, who built a charming cascading stream that emptied into a deep pool of water populated with goldfish and koi. Maybe the fact that they had built a submerged edge created the opportunity for raccoons to come fishing. While the family was on vacation, a neighbor who came daily to feed the fish noticed a lot of damage one morning, and no fish came to the surface when she tried to feed them. Everyone thought that all of the fish had been lost, so the fish-feeding routine was stopped. Two months later, one of the boys spotted 2 fish still alive and well in the pond; they had survived on their environment alone.

Raccoons are not the only enemies of ponds in our area. "One morning I woke up to see a four-foot tall bird standing in the middle of the pond and feasting," recalls Kyte. Herons are said to be able to hear the sound of water from three miles away, and they love fish. Kyte now sets a net over his pond every night. Lambert crosses a few fishing lines over his pond during the dry season and has not had any unwelcome visitors. The Wood-Creeks decided that they would not add more fish to their pond until a net was designed and ready to be set at night.

Strangely enough in Lafayette, Doug and Marti Kohen, who built a 15x5 foot, 3 1/2 foot deep rectangular pond that is not protected from predators, have never noticed a problem. The Kohen's pond resembles the antique irrigation basins that have been built for more than 2000 years around the Mediterranean Sea. The simple shape, leaning back against the hill, is the focal point of the main patio. It is surrounded by plants and a cascade adorns part of the far side, creating the movement that's necessary for water

circulation and adding the gentle sound effects that seem to be required of all ponds. In the large basin swim 30-40 goldfish and five koi. "When we have guests, they always sit on the coping of the pond," says Kohen, "and they play with the fish."

All of these pond owners have noticed the strong attraction of people to ponds. Kyte remembers that the sound of the cascade was the only thing that soothed a colicky grandchild, while Anita Wood says that when her mother-in-law visits, she always takes her breakfast by the pond. They all concede that while ponds bring joy and relaxation, it takes work to maintain them. A weekly cleaning of the filters is required, some ponds need weed clearing, especially in the summer; a serious general system cleaning is required once a year, and as far as feeding, it is more often than not a daily chore.

The last aspect of these attractive features is their price. "I would say that the price range is between \$7,500. and \$15,000.," said Lambert, but there is no upper limit. For example, a few years ago Lambert created a "swimming pond" in Lafayette, a self-sustaining system large and clear enough to swim in. The biggest water feature he worked on covered many acres, which sounds more like a little artificial lake than an average family home pond.



Steve Lambert's daughter in her Orinda garden Photo Sophie Braccini



The Creek-Wood family removes plants from the pond Photo Sophie Braccini



The Kohens' rectangular pond, full of goldfish and koi, is the focal point of the patio Photos Doug Kohen



One of the waterfall features of Al Kyte's pond



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Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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