

## Container Water Gardens

Water, being one of the four elements of life, has always created a feeling of serenity and beauty when I have experienced it in a garden or woodland setting. To hear the sound of a soft waterfall or see the spray of a fountain creates a feeling of contentment and calmness. In 50 years of gardening in several states, I have longed for a water feature other than the bird bath and a small fountain, but have never had the room for a pond. When my husband and I moved to Chatham and began living on the Oyster Pond, we finally had a water feature, but not one we could plant. While designing our property to be a "Certified Wildlife Habitat", (see article published in the August 14, 2008 edition of this newspaper), one of the criteria was both running and still water. We were more determined than ever to find a solution to developing a water feature that would be a focal point in the garden and provide a place where one could sit and contemplate the beauty of nature.

In designing the garden beds around our home, we were zealous about planting perennials in areas that would allow for a scenic view from every window and door. To that end we had a wedge shaped unattractive space between our tiered gardens beds and an outdoor storage shed as seen from our back door and kitchen window. With that space in mind, our dilemma was solved by the wonderful assistance of the staff at Country Garden on West Main Street in Hyannis, where water gardening in creative and unique ways is their specialty.

We discovered that there are a variety of materials and supplies available for water gardens on the market ranging from a full blown pond to a variety of self contained water features including a kit that includes everything but the water and plants. There are also pond-less water falls that are ideal for public places or homes where there are small children. These waterfalls come in several different sizes and have the look of the real thing. They can be built to nestle into the existing contour of the garden and have a re-circulating pump housed in a well that is buried under the ground. All the components needed for this delightful water feature come in a kit. With the addition of plants and some rocks near the waterfall, one couldn't tell it was man-made and not a natural water fall.

The advantages of a container water garden are that they fit into any size space, can grow well in shady areas where other plants or grasses won't grow, are easy to install and are low maintenance. The greatest aspect is that one has the sound and beauty of running water and the garden can be both indoor and/or outdoor depending on the season. This type of garden is a real joy for those individuals who love to garden but can no longer bend over to tend to the plants or find it difficult to go outside to garden. A container water garden can be as small as a dish or as large as whatever size container one decides to use.

The first step for us was to select an appropriate color and size container that would fit the available space and also that would accommodate the plants that would be planted. Since the pottery container that was chosen had a hole in the bottom, it was necessary to

obtain a water proof “patch kit” to cover the hole. Next was the selection of plants. We wanted both tall and low plants of different colors and textures to draw attention to the area where the container would be placed. It’s important to note that on the Cape an outdoor container water garden should not be planted before the third week in May and taken indoors by the end of September. By taking the container water garden into the house for the winter it can be enjoyed throughout the year. However, with sun and food year round the plants may grow larger than the container can hold. You will wind up having to divide them, like any other plant that becomes too large for their pot.

There are four different categories of plants that can be used in water garden containers. It’s a matter of availability, personal preference and container size as to which ones will work the best. Within each category there are many varieties to choose from. Floating plants with leaves like *Nymphaea* (water lilies), *Nelumbo* (dwarf lotus) and water poppy, whose roots are submerged in the water but their leaves and flowers float on top require adequate room in order to spread out and float. Marginal plants whose roots are partially submerged in the water such as *Colocasia esculenta* (taro), water iris and lobelia are plants that would normally be found growing around the edge of a pond. Free floating plants have their roots float along with the flower and are not attached to the soil such as *Azolla caroliniana* (fairy moss), *Neptunia oleracea* (sensitive plant) and *Salvinia* ssp. (water fern). These do best in larger containers and may need to be thinned as they can spread and take over other plants. Fully submerged plants compete with green water algae for the available nutrients and aide in keeping the water clean. They are used primarily in ponds and serve as a spawning media for fish. Plants such as *Ceratophyllum demersum* (hornwort) and *Egeria densa* (anacharis) tend to not be necessary in a container water garden and can be invasive.

We selected a rather tall Taro, for the back of the container, a red leaved Lobelia for the side and an apricot and yellow Water Lily for the front. Once home, the plants were submerged under the water in their individual pots, and fed an application of aquatic plant food once a month. It is important to watch the water level in the container as it evaporates easily and we found that every few days a “topping off” of the container with a hose was needed. Depending on the size of the container and plants, it is a personal decision as to the installation of a re-circulating pump in the water garden container. We chose not to use a pump as we had a fountain that was placed in front of the water garden to provide the sound and sight of flowing water.

To enhance the ambience of this new garden, we covered the ground in the entire wedge shaped area with white gravel and added a stone bench for sitting. At long last we had created a peaceful and serene garden spot complete with a container water garden and softly flowing fountain from which to view the rest of our garden.