

# "Just Add Water"

*Articles and Photos by Soni Forsman*



## **Container Water Garden - *petite garden makes 'BIG' splash***

Fill a container with water and it is a reflecting pool. Add aquatic plants and it is a small water garden. Nestled among potted annuals on the deck or patio, or as an accent in a perennial garden, this small water feature will shimmer in its surroundings.

Most containers that are watertight or can be made to hold water have potential to become one of these gardens. Use plumber's epoxy to plug any drain holes. The choice of container will determine whether the look is formal, rustic or something in between. Ideas include but not limited to: deep sink, wash tub, livestock tank, vintage crock, half-oak barrel, terracotta or plastic flower pot, claw-foot bathtub, a hold-everything plastic tub/tote or an one-of-a-kind re-purposed vintage item.

## Set-up

Once a container is chosen and before water and plants have been added, move it from place to place to find where it adds the most magic. If a waterlily is to be one of the plants, the container must receive at least four hours of sun, preferably six or more. Before filling with water, check its level using a carpenter level and adjust with wood shims if necessary.

A classic selection of plants for a traditional container water garden includes one small- to medium-size hardy waterlily, an upright or marginal plant, a decorative floating plant and/or one that creeps over the water's surface. A submerged or underwater plant can also be added. Upright/marginal and bog plants naturally grow in the shallow water near the edge of a pond or in the surrounding marshy areas. Floating plants do just that – they float dangling their roots in the water. The submerged plant releases oxygen into the water. (See several plant suggestions at end of this article. (T) = tropical plant)

For the above collection of plants, the container should hold at least 20 to 25 gallons of water with a depth of 12 to 18 inches and a diameter of at least 20 inches. A half-oak barrel is approximately that size. For a pleasing look, keep the number of plants, their height and width in scale with the size of the outer container.

The decorative container holds the water. Plants are individually planted in appropriate-sized pots. In a half-barrel, use a one-gallon pot for the waterlily, a one- or two-gallon for the upright plant and a four-inch square pot for the submerged plant. Recommended potting medium for aquatic plants is garden soil that is free of pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and organic matter. Soil with some clay is preferred. Do not use the lightweight bagged potting mixes recommend for hanging baskets and containers of annuals. Top-dress each pot with about one-inch of pea gravel or 3/8" river rock. The gravel/rock keeps the soil from washing out and clouding the water.

In a half-barrel, the waterlily sits on the bottom near the center. Place the upright plant on stacked bricks or an overturned flowerpot, adjusting the height so that only a couple inches of water is over the top of the pot. If using a floating plant, toss it in. A piece of two of a creeping plant can be tucked in with the upright one. The underwater plant (if used) rests on the bottom of the container.

## Summer care and maintenance

Fertilize the waterlily when planting and twice a month June to Labor Day. Use a fertilizer recommended for aquatic plants, following the directions. Read instructions carefully if using a time-release product. The upright/marginal plants should be fed in the spring and again mid-summer. Flowering marginal plants will benefit from monthly feedings. Do not fertilize the submerged/oxygenating plant. It feeds on the nutrients present in the water.

During periods of high temperatures and no rain, evaporation will drop the water level. Containerized water gardens look best when the water is maintained near the top. When filling, allow the water to overflow. This will wash out some mosquito larvae, if present, and refresh the water. *Mosquito Dunks*, a form of bacillus thuringiensis, will control mosquito larvae. It is wildlife and pet friendly. Fish, especially Koi, are not

recommended for these small water gardens due to swings in the water temperature. A couple feeder or young goldfish will be OK.

Other tasks include, removing spent waterlily blooms, yellowing pads and grooming upright and floating plants as needed. If/when the container looks overcrowded, some waterlily pads can be removed, pinch back the creeping plants and remove extra floating plants.

## **Fall, winter care and what happens early next spring.....**

Before Halloween, remove all plants from the container. To store the hardy waterlily, remove all pads and buds and store in a bucket of water in a cool, dark and above freezing location. A temperature of 35 to 45 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal. Even if conditions are less than perfect, store the waterlily someplace in the dark. Don't toss!!! Bury the hardy upright plant (still in the pot) in the garden. Mulch heavily. Toss the floating, trailing and submerged plants on the compost pile and purchase new ones next season. A tropical marginal plant can be wintered as a houseplant in bright light with plenty of moisture, or compost it and buy new in the spring.

Clean the outer container. Anything that is breakable or might succumb to winter extremes should be moved into a shed, garage or home. The half-barrel can stay out but turn upside down. Winter stock tanks empty and covered or turned upside down.

In April, move the waterlily outside into a sunny location. Keep in the bucket of water until new growth begins to show. Rake the mulch off the buried marginal. A week later, remove it from its winter resting spot, wash off and place in a bucket of water. Wait for new growth to show. Set up the container. If the plant(s) need dividing, now is the time. Fertilize both plants before returning to their summer home. Purchase another floater and an oxygenating plant.

Creating a container water garden requires no digging, the location is not permanent, cost is less than an in-ground water garden and it showcases its owner's creativity. This is the year to make a container water garden. Think outside the box (container). Find one that's **YOU**.

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**Plant suggestions – Hardy small hardy waterlilies:** *Nymphaea* 'Helvola' and *N.* 'Little Sue.'

**Marginal plants:** Bog arum/arrow arum (*Peltandra virginica*), Water bamboo, dwarf (*Dulichium arundianaceum*), Chameleon plant (*Houttuynia cordata*), Baby tut (*Cyperus involucratus*) (T), Dwarf papyrus (*Cyperus prolifer/haspan*) (T) Dwarf red-stemmed parrot feather (*Myriophyllum* ssp) (T). **Floating plants:** Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) (T), Water lettuce (*Pistia*) (T). **Underwater plant:** Anacharis (*Egeria densa*) (T).