

"Just Add Water"

Articles and Photos by Soni Forsman

Aquatic plant handbook, continued

Last month, I listed the four categories of aquatic plants and wrote about the first, surface plants, in some detail. Three plant groups remain - marginal/bog, floating and submerged.

Marginal/Bog Plants

Some plants in this group prefer to grow in shallow water (marginal) others in moist areas (bog). The difference – a marginal one likes its roots continually in water while a true bog plant only tolerates standing water for a few days. The foliage and flowers (if present) of both grow out of the water, stretching upwards. Together these plants are the backbone of the water garden, blending the land with the water.

The cattail is a recognizable plant in this group. In a backyard water garden, it should be containerized to keep the roots from invading the rocks and gravel. My favorite is *Typha latifolia* "Variegata." Its green and cream vertically striped foliage brings color and height to the edge of the water garden. It behaves itself in a two-gallon nursery pot and is easy to divide if I tackle it every couple years.

Other must-have hardy marginal plants are pickerel rush (*Pontederia cordata*), variegated sweetflag (*Acorus calamus* 'Variegatus'), lizard tail (*Saururus cernuus*) and the native blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*). For the moist edges, marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*), chameleon plant (*Houttuynia coerdata*) and water forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpiodes*).

For a tropical look, try water cannas, taros (*Colocasia* spp.) prized for large elephant ear-like leaves; for feathery foliage consider umbrella palm, Baby and King Tut (*Cyperus* spp.).



Variegated Cattail (Typha latifolia 'Variegata') marginal plant.



Marsh Marigold (Caltha palustris) - bog plant

Floating Plants

These plants float on the water's surface with their roots dangling free in the water, competing with algae for nutrients. The roots of most floaters are good spawning sites for adult goldfish and shelter the fry. Not for use if Koi are present.

Most popular floaters are water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) and water lettuce (*Pistia stratiotes*). Others include water fern (*Azolla*) and the common duckweed (*Lemna minor*).



Water Hyacinth (Eichhornia crassipes) - a favorite floating plant

Submerged Plants

Often referred to as oxygenators because they release oxygen into the water during the day. This category of plant grows completely submerged. In addition to contributing to water quality, they also provide spawning and hiding places for smaller ornamental fish.

These plants are generally sold in bunches and are not for water gardens with Koi. They would be consumed in a short time. Anacharis (*Elodea* ssp.) has dark green fern-like foliage and is a popular selection. It should be planted in a small container (4" square) using pea gravel or something similar as the planting medium. It takes its nutrients from the water. Recommendation is one bunch for 1 to 2 square feet of water surface. Hornwort or coontail (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) is an easy choice. It has no roots and grows in floating mats suspended in the water. Just toss it in.

In a water garden with a good filtration system, submerged plants are not as necessary as they were a decade or so ago. But, they are still beneficial to goldfish habitat and in container water gardens.



Anacharis - a popular submerged oxygenating plant

The Lotus

Is this plant a fifth classification or is it a marginal plant? It grows in shallow water - 6 inch over the top of its container? I don't see it categorized very often. Because it adds that 'wow' factor to the water garden or stands on its own in a container water garden, I vote for a fifth aquatic plant group – the lotus.



Nelumbo 'Mrs. Perry D. Slocum' - Lotus