

Water Garden Plants

*Information adapted from
www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/watergarden
by Greg Stack*

Basically, a water garden is just a pool of water that is home to plants and possibly fish and other water creatures. They can consist of a fountain, half barrel, plastic tub or sunken liner that can hold water.

Aquatic Plant Selection

Plants used in small aquatic gardens are grown in separate pots and then these pots are placed into the water-filled container. Heavy, clay garden soil is used as a potting media. After the plant is potted, top the soil with a 1/2 to 3/4 inch layer of pea gravel to help keep the soil in place. Don't use a commercial potting soil mix or any type of soil mix

There are many types of plants available for use in a garden pool. Considerations such as water depth, amount of sunlight and how each species relates to its surroundings need to be taken into account when choosing plant material. Both floating leafed and submerged plants are needed for a healthy pond and need to be included in your selection. Water garden plants are called aquatic, because their life cycle revolves around water. Aquatics can be divided into three major categories: emergent, submerged and floaters.

Emergent plants are sometimes also called **marginals**. These plants are found along the edges of a pond where the roots are attached to the muddy bottom and portions of their stems are above the water. Common examples include cattails, and iris. Further from the edge, between shallow and deep water, are other emergent plants where roots are attached to the bottom, but have floating leaves above the water. Water lilies fall into this category. Bog plants are also considered to be marginals.

Though most are not grown for their flowers, some, like lotus and waterlilies, are extremely dramatic when in flower. Bog plants are available for those not able to locate their water garden in sufficient sunlight to support good plant growth. Some bog plants can tolerate as little as three hours of sun and still provide interest to the water garden.

Many bog plants grow in constantly moist to soggy soils, while others actually grow in standing water. There are many different species of bog plants with varying heights, textures and foliage colors that add height and drama to water gardens. Lotus, dwarf bamboo, iris, cattails, and sweet flag are some examples.

Submerged plants are those that for the most part remain beneath the water surface. They are often referred to as oxygenators. These plants help combat algae by consuming excess nutrients while at the same time providing cover for fish and producing oxygen during daylight hours. Roots of these plants are not used

for nutrient or water uptake, but only for anchorage. Submerged plants are stocked at the rate of about one bunch per two square feet of water surface area. Caging these plants is sometimes suggested if the pond contains fish, which tend to forage on submerged plant foliage.

Floaters are not rooted in the soil, but are allowed to float freely above or below the water surface. Floaters enhance the display of water lilies and lotus as well as adding a finishing touch to the water garden. They are the "ground covers" of the pond world. They may be restricted by a framework to prevent them from moving around or allowed to float freely with the breeze. This produces an ever-changing look to the water surface. Some floaters are very prolific and may need to be kept in check by scooping out excess plants on occasion. Duckweed, water hyacinth, and water lettuce are examples.

Plants for the Aquatic Garden

Aquatic gardens need a mix of plants to attain a balanced system. These plants can be a combination of emergent, submerged and floaters.



Submerged Plants (Oxygenators)

Anacharis (*Egeria densa*) Whorls of deep green leaves with occasional white flowers on the surface. Most common oxygenator.



Marginal/Bog Plants

Arrowheads (*Sagittaria sp.*) Attractive, green arrowhead shaped leaves. White blooms in the summer. Grows from 12 - 48 inches tall. Tolerates sun to part shade.



Blue Flag Iris (*Iris versicolor*) Mixed blue flowers in June with grass like foliage. Grows from 24 - 30 inches tall and will tolerate full sun to part shade.



Dwarf Papyrus (*Cyperus isocladius*) Green grass like foliage with "starburst like" flowerheads that turn brown in the fall. Grows 12 - 18 inches tall and tolerates sun to part shade.



Lotus and Water Lilies



Floaters

Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) Popular floater with trailing roots, balloon like petioles and spikes of lavender flowers when given enough sun.



Water Lettuce (*Pistia stratiotes*) Velvet, blue green leaves forming a rosette of foliage that looks like leaf lettuce.



Fish and Snails for Water Gardens

Several small snails are very helpful as they eat algae, fish waste, and decaying organic matter. Fish such as mollies or guppies, are good choices. They do well in the variable water temperatures of a small patio pond plus they eat mosquitoes. Larger containers of 20 gallons or more can handle one to two goldfish.

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