

Life without water...impossible. A garden without a water feature? Well, why? Remember running through the sprinkler or "Slip and Slide"? Or, what about a kiddie pool with an alligator float? If you currently have any of these, you need read no further.

I don't remember not having some kind of water feature in my garden nor do I care to. My own first garden in Chicago had none but we did have Lake Michigan, a raging ocean of a lake. I swam in it, fished in it and curled up on blankets in the dark to catch its cool breezes. My parents built a swimming pool when I was eleven. This was a cold northern May when I first dove in. I didn't get back out much for six or seven years. Swimming saved my awkward chubby body and sculpted it fine as a fish.

My husband and I have now gardened together for twenty-six years and built a multitude of water features in our gardens, including kiddie pools and outdoor showers. They have all been homemade and some of them have been ridiculous. Sometimes we did it our way...and sometimes we listened to good advice.

What about a simple little water garden and a few fish? Good idea? A sleek architectural gazing pond of deep black water adjacent to your patio? Or a small trickle of a stream crossing the garden path, perhaps? A modest ten by ten foot pool with stone, water, fish and plants and a waterfall sound good? Or maybe just an old tin tub or a sleek cast concrete container with a full ecosystem or perhaps just one lotus plant? My current favorite water garden contains no plants or fish. Just a low concrete bowl (a birdbath sans pedestal) at the edge of my deck. It contains a small cherub's head, a few pebbles, and the constant presence of water and its subtle movements.

Whatever you choose, water is essential to gardening and a water garden is comforting to the spirit. If you are contemplating your own water garden in the ground, consult books and experts first. Here is some of what the experts say:

Give your water garden full sun, four to six hours minimum. Don't place it under the large trees; their litter increases maintenance and perhaps algae production. Don't choose the lowest spot in the garden; your pond will fill with fertilizers from your lawn, which will also create algae and possibly threaten fish.

Check your local zoning laws concerning depths and location. Some states require water gardens three feet in depth to be fenced.

Your water garden must hold water and, for in the ground ponds, 45 mil. thick EPDM rubber is the current liner of choice. Fish need a minimum of 18 inches of water depth and plant needs vary from three inches for bog plants to two feet for water lilies. Water lilies and lotus are the most beautiful of water garden plants and need sunlight to bloom well.



You will need a water pump to move your water for sound and to give oxygen to your fish and to assist in water clarity. You will also need a water filter. You will need enough plants to cover 40 to 60 percent of the water surface to again prevent algae.

You will need stone, bricks or rocks to hold your liner in place. You will need pots to plant your plants in, pebbles to cover the potted soil, bricks to elevate or adjust the potted plant depth. I have also brought boulders and stone for the water's edge and for interest in the water.

Finally, you will need fish. You should not overstock fish as they produce nitrogen which creates — you guessed it — algae. Let them eat mosquito larvae and feed them only occasionally for fun. This is not cruel; it is their job to catch and eat insects. Also, fish food increases, yep, algae. Again, don't overstock. One inch of fish per square foot of the water surface is the prescribed consensus.

Overwhelmed? You should be. The building and installation of your water garden is the most complex gardening you will ever initiate. Don't be intimidated. Take your time and get informed. You will need professional advice, readily available at retail nurseries that feature water gardens. You should also buy or borrow a few books. This is no a quick Saturday errand. Study, contemplate, then build. Take it from me, I've made all the mistakes.

Once properly installed, a water garden is relatively low maintenance. (Especially if you get your husband to do it.) Just don't try to bend the rules too far. A water garden requires balance. Tip the scales and you can invite your friends for some very expensive pea soup. Follow the rules and invite pleasure into your home.

Professional sources: Trees by Touliatos, 2020 Brooks Road, Memphis, phone 901-346-8065; Perry's Water Gardens, Franklin, NC, phone 704-524-3264; Maryland Aquatic Nurseries, Jarrettsville, MD, phone 410-557-7615. For books, check your favorite local bookstore or your local branch of the Memphis Public Library.

A Nursery Inside A Garden

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