



# Hardy Water Lilies

## *Their Planting & Care*

*For more information about the  
Colorado Water Garden Society  
or other aspects of pond keeping along the front-range go to:*

<http://www.colowatergardensociety.org>

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### **About your hardy water lily...**

The hardy water lily (*Nymphaea*) is the jewel of the water garden. It's known for floating leaves and brilliant flowers that sit on the surface of the water. The genus is also the foundation of the water garden. Hardy water lilies are the only plants native to every USDA hardiness zone in North America, from 2 – 10.

Hardy water lilies bloom from May to September. All hardy lilies share the ability to go dormant during colder Winter months and rebound again the next Spring unlike their cousins, the tropical water lilies, which will not survive the Winter in all but tropical areas.

The flower of the hardy lily is elegant and fascinating. Once the flower bud reaches the surface of the water, it will open in the morning and close in the evening for three successive days before sinking beneath the surface again. Hardy lilies bloom in all colors except blues and purples. (For those colors, you must look to the tropical varieties, although hybridists are now avidly pursuing the elusive "blue hardy").

The leaves, or pads, of hardy lilies come in many variations and sizes. Some plants have smaller pads, flowers, and spread (the diameter at the surface), and can be suitable for containers or smaller water gardens; others are much bigger, with spreads up to seven feet or more. These are better suited to larger ponds. However, the size of your plant will be influenced by pot size, amount of fertilization, sunlight, water depth and temperature, as well as variety.

Hardy water lilies grow from a rhizome (similar to that of an iris.) Though native lilies grow wild directly in the mud of the pond bottom, most home pond keepers, grow their lilies in pots for reasons of control and convenience.

Backyard lily growers usually propagate their collection by dividing rhizomes to form new plants, each of which is identical to the mother plant. This is called asexual propagation. While some water lilies can be pollinated and produce seed, this approach is not usually done except by bees and plant hybridizers. In any case, many of the popular hybrids are sterile and can only be propagated asexually.

The hardy water lily existed only as a few species found in different parts of the world until the mid-nineteenth century when Joseph Bory Latour Marliac began to develop hybrids. In time, he created lilies of many shapes and colors, including most of what we now regard as the “classic” water lilies. These were the lilies Monet bought for his ponds and most are still in cultivation today. New hybrids continue to be produced by today’s hybridizers and commercial growers, expanding the range of color and form.

## **Planting your hardy water lily...**

Hardy water lilies are actually quite easy to grow. If the lily is already potted up, just place it in the pond at a depth that keeps the pads at or near the surface. Adjust the depth gradually if needed, and the pads will grow to reach the new surface level. If the lily arrives as a bare-root or a newly divided rhizome, it will need to be planted.

Be sure to keep the plant moist and out of direct sunlight while working with it. Be aware that handling the rhizome can stain bare hands.

Since the rhizome grows horizontally, use a container that is wide and shallow (12” – 18” wide by 6” – 10” deep). The pot can be with or without holes (or even a mesh basket) as long as you line it with something to keep the soil in the pot and not in the water. Use a heavy soil (Colorado clay is well suited for this) and enrich it with aquatic fertilizer. Avoid light materials such as perlite, vermiculite, peat or any of the “soil-less” potting mixtures all of which will float out of the pot and foul the water.

Remove old or damaged leaves from the rhizome as well as any thick fleshy roots and most of the old soil, if you are dividing. Leave emerging leaves and buds and the newer hair-like roots. Plant the rhizome against the side of the pot, with the growing tip pointing slightly upwards and toward the center of the pot. This will anchor the plant, leaving the growing tip at the surface of the soil and give maximum room for growth before repotting is necessary. If you cover the soil with a layer of rock or pea gravel, that will help reduce suspension of soil into the water. Lower your lily gently into the pond at an angle to allow the air to escape from the soil. Keeping a newly planted lily in shallow water at first may speed its early growth.

## **Caring for your hardy water lily...**

Once planted, hardy water lilies don’t need much care. They like to have six to eight hours of direct sun each day (although some varieties will tolerate less). They prefer quiet water, without splash or strong currents. It’s best to remove yellowed pads and spent blossoms periodically (with their stems) so they won’t decay in the pond. Fertilize monthly during the growing season (every two weeks in warmer months) with aquatic fertilizer tablets pushed into the soil.

Your lily will need repotting when the rhizome has grown to reach the other side of the pot. At that time, cut away any dead portions and divide the rhizome into sections - each with one or two growing tips. Each section when repotted will produce a new plant, so you’ll have plenty of plants to grow or give away to friends. Repotting and division may need to be done each season, or less often, depending on the variety and the pot size.

In Winter, lower your lilies to the bottom of the pond. This will ensure the rhizomes don't freeze.

In Spring, raise the pots to their previous level in the pond. Pot up stored rhizomes as described and place them in your pond.

## Selecting your hardy water lily...

Hardy water lilies come in many varieties that differ in size, color, form, and preferred growing conditions. To avoid disappointment, be sure to know which lily you are getting, and keep them labeled for future reference.

Miniature hardy lilies are especially good for containers or small ponds and include:

*Nymphaea 'Indiana'* (changeable)  
*Nymphaea laydekeri 'Fulgens'* (red)  
*Nymphaea pygmaea 'Helvola'* (yellow)  
*Nymphaea 'White Laydeker'* (white)

Hardy lilies that can tolerate more shade (but at least 3 – 4 hours of sun per day) include:

*Nymphaea 'Charlene Strawn'* (yellow)  
*Nymphaea 'James Brydon'* (red)  
*Nymphaea marliacea 'Carnea'* (light pink)  
*Nymphaea marliacea 'Chromatella'* (yellow)  
*Nymphaea 'Virginia'* (white)

Other water lilies recommended for beginning water gardeners in Colorado include:

*Nymphaea 'Clyde Ikens'* (peach)  
*Nymphaea 'Colorado'* (peach)  
*Nymphaea 'Gladstone'* (white)  
*Nymphaea 'Pink Beauty'* (pink)

## Further information:

To read more about hardy water lily varieties, their propagation and cultivation, as well as general horticultural issues in your pond we recommend:

The Pond Doctor: Planning & Maintaining A Healthy Water Garden, by Helen Nash, © 1994. ISBN 0806906871 (ISBN13: 9780806906874)

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