Container Water Gardens

How to Construct, Plant, & Care for Them

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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www.colowatergardensociety.org

Why plant a container water garden?

If you'd like to try water gardening and don't want to do something as permanent as a large pond, or you don't have space for such, container water gardening is a pleasing alternative.

Many experienced water gardeners use container water gardens to utilize excess plants they have divided, or to satisfy the desire for more water features. One water feature never seems to be enough!

Choosing a Container

You will need a container that will hold water. The container could be a ceramic planter without bottom holes for drainage. It could be a large watering can, a crock-pot, an old footed bathtub, or a half-barrel. The possibilities are unlimited. Garden centers sell a number of tubs designed specifically for water gardens.

Half barrels are available at minimal cost, but they require lining with two layers of black plastic or a preformed liner made specifically for the barrel. Lining safeguards against loss of water and blocks leaching of toxic substances that could affect plants or fish.

Container Placement

After choosing your container, you need to determine where to place your garden. Six hours of sun per day is recommended. Containers can be sunk in the ground or stand on grade. Containers set on the ground or placed on a deck or patio can be subjected to temperature changes from 50° Fahrenheit at night to 90° Fahrenheit during a typical Summer day. This rapid temperature change can affect plant growth. Placing a small, 200-watt submersible aquarium heater in the container will help to even-out temperature swings. Setting the temperature at 72° Fahrenheit will allow the heater to turn on only if the water temperature drops below this level.
Smaller pots may be more easily affected by temperatures. Keep in mind that a darker container will be more apt to absorb heat from the sun than a light colored container. Different materials, such as metal, are more affected by surrounding air temperatures than heavy ceramic. Smaller pots will benefit from being placed where they receive sun in the morning and are shaded in the hottest part of the afternoon.

Setting up and Planting

Place 1" – 2" of pea gravel in the bottom of your container and then add water to about one-third down from the top. The pea gravel aids in the creation of natural biological filtration by increasing surface area on which good bacteria can grow.

Next, select plants for the garden. If your container is large enough (15" in diameter or greater) consider planting a miniature water lily, several marginal plants, and some surface plants. Lilies and Marginal plants should be potted in media in separate pots. Do not use household potting soil, compost, vermiculite, or perlite as potting media. These materials float and can foul the water.

Plant marginal species in a one-quart pot (or minimum four-inch pot) for best results. If the pot has drainage holes, cover them with a piece of newspaper. Fill part way with rich, heavy garden soil, add a fertilizer tablet suited to aquatic use, and place the plant in the center. Spread the roots and top with additional soil, packing firmly.

Hardy and tropical lilies (*Nymphaea*) need larger containers. A "miniature" hardy lily needs a pot that's a minimum of 8" in diameter. A standard size hardy lily needs a 12" diameter pot. Note: plastic hanging baskets are well sized for planting hardy lilies because they are more wide than deep.
Tropical water lilies need a one-gallon pot for planting. Fill the pot half full with a rich, heavy garden soil and add 2 – 4 fertilizer tablets. Continue filling the pot with soil to about 2" from the top. Set the plant tuber upright in the center of the pot with roots buried gently in the soil. Make sure the tip of the plant crown is at soil level. Firmly pack soil in the pot.

Hardy lilies are planted in much the same way as tropicals. Hardy lilies grow horizontally across the container, so a wider pot is more important than depth. Plant the rhizome at one edge of the pot with the rhizome inclined at an angle of about 30° to 45°. The crown (growing tip) should be exposed and pointing toward the center of the pot. Use heavy garden soil, firmly packed. The plant should have a minimum of 6" of water cover.

Consider adding some surface/floating plants. These sit on the surface of the water and help to absorb excess nutrients. If you have a large container, you may wish to add oxygenating plants, which float suspended in the water.

After setting up your container garden, you may wish to add a few fish to control mosquitoes. The best choices are White Cloud and inexpensive feeder goldfish. Another option for mosquito control: use dunks or mosquito bits – a manufactured additive that contains Bti (Bacillus thuringiensis, a naturally occurring bacterium that affects mosquitoes only).

Remember to use a dechlorinator and chloramine remover at the rate specified if you are using municipally treated water. (Most plants are not adversely affected by chlorine, but fish and snails are.) Add water as required to replace water lost though evaporation and transpiration.

Plants for Container Water Gardens

Strong Vertical Accents (3' – 5'):
Giant Variegated Reed *(Arundo donax variegata),* Cane-like with green and white leaves. Hardy.
Umbrella Palm *(Cyperus alternifolius),* Clump with upright shoots, green spray of leaves at top resembling an umbrella. Tropical.
Water Canna, Numerous varieties with red, orange, and pink flowers and large leaves. Tropical.
White Rush, *(Scirpus albescens),* Needle-like, white with green striped foliage. Hardy.

Vertical Accents (1' – 2'):

Dwarf Cattail *(Typha minima),* Small sword-like foliage, and brown catkins. Hardy.
Sagittaria*,* Green narrow foliage, with clusters of white flowers on spikes. Hardy.
Star Grass *(Dichromena colorata*), Star-shaped white flowers atop needle-like stems from grass-like foliage. Tropical.
Taro *(Colocasia esculenta),* Many varieties, leaves are shaped like an elephant ear. Tropical.

Blooming or Colorful Plants:

Aquatic mint *(Mentha aquatica),* Ruffled green leaves with top spike of purple flower. Hardy.
Chameleon Plant (*Houttuynia Cordata Variegata*), Multi-colored leaves of white, green, and red. Tolerates less light. Hardy.
Water Parsley, Variegated *(Oenanthe javanica* 'Flamingo'), Pinkish, white and green leaves, simulates the top of celery. Hardy.

Cascading Plants:

Parrot's Feather *(Myriophyllum aquaticum)*, Feathery whorled leaves, grows across a pond, will cascade in a pot. Hardy.
Sensitive Plant/Pea Plant *(Aeschynomene fluitans)*, Yellow sweet pea-like flowers on symmetrically oval leaved stems. Tropical.

Miniature Water Lilies (Nymphaea)

Hardy:

N. 'Helvola', Yellow flowers, mottled foliage
N. laydekeri 'Rosea', Small pink flowers
N. 'Perry's Baby Red', Red cup shaped flowers, small leaves.
N. 'Tetragona', Cup shaped white blooms, green leaves with purple blotches

Small Water Lily Varieties (adaptable to container gardening)

Hardy:

N. '*Chrysantha*', Creamy yellow cup-like flower darkening with age.
N. laydekeri 'Fulgens', Red flowers, brown flecked dark green leaves.

Tropical:

N. 'Dauben', Small pale blue flowers, speckled green foliage. Tolerates less light.
N. 'Tina', Deep violet-purple blooms, light green leaves.
N. 'Margaret Mary', Blue, star-like flowers, lightly mottled leaves

Surface/Floating Plants:

Duck Weed *(Lemna spp.),* Light green tiny oval leaves. Tropical
Water lettuce *(Pistia stratiotes),* Rosette shaped foliage. Tropical