



A Low-Tech Water Garden

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Picture yourself sitting in the shade on a hot summer day, lazily sipping iced tea, listening to the gentle trickle of water into a lovely pond of water lilies—in your very own garden. Impossible, you say. Just think of all those pumps, filters, liners, running electricity to the pond, digging the pond, maintaining the pond! Not so, I say. With the basic equipment of a pool liner and an outside water faucet you can have exactly what I have described at modest expense.

The first thing to determine, once you have decided that a water garden would be a wonderful addition to your garden, is where to locate it. If you wish to grow water lilies, you need a site that receives at least 5 to 6 hours of direct sunlight a day. Books and catalogs advise against locating a pond under or near trees: there is too much shade and the falling debris will foul the water. I ignored this advice because I wanted to sit in the shade of a tree sipping tea, as I have already mentioned. However, the tree is limbed high, the pond does get the required amount of sunlight with dappled light the rest of the day, and I fish out leaves in the fall.

After determining your site, decide upon the size and shape of your pool. Water garden catalogs and books offer all kinds of useful information on this subject and are quite specific as to the size of liner you will need for the area and depth of your pond. Ponds can be anywhere from a foot to three foot deep, depending on the kind of digging you encounter. And yes, the digging is hard work; enlist some help if you can. But you have to do it only once. As far as the liner goes, I would strongly urge that you buy the best quality you can afford. The choices are PVC or rubber with guarantees ranging from 10 years to a lifetime depending upon the thickness and type of material.

Because catalogs and water gardening books provide excellent instructions on digging a pond and installing the liner, I will not go into that here. How to get water to the pond is the next important matter. The most obvious way is simply to fill the pond with a hose. This, however, is not too aesthetically pleasing, and, as the pond may need

daily topping off during hot summer weather, constantly having a hose around to trip over may be a situation best avoided. Digging a shallow trench (6 inches or so) in the ground, running a hose from an outside faucet to the pond and then covering it, works well. The pond end of the hose can be finished off with a simple piece of copper pipe which will age to a mellow brown. The pipe can be artfully hidden with rocks or plants and will create the desired trickle effect. Thus, when you want water, you have only to turn on the faucet—not electricity. Overflow of the pond is not a problem: the plants growing around its edges can be ones that appreciate extra moisture. This removes the need for a recirculating pump. I have found that by running some water almost daily into my pond I have no problem with algae. The plants also help to maintain a balanced condition; therefore no filter is needed. The water turns dark over a period of time (a special dye is sold to achieve this very effect that my pond develops naturally); the dark color is reflective of the sky and hides the pots that contain the water lilies and other water plants.

Maintenance of such a pond is relatively simple. In the spring I empty my pond completely of water and debris and scrub the liner with a stiff brush. This gives it a good clean start for the season and is the only cleaning necessary. I refill it, add the lilies and other plants that have been spending the winter in my unheated basement, and wait for the wildlife to come. Which it invariably does. Birds, insects, frogs, and once even a Great Blue Heron are drawn to a water source and to me are one of the great unexpected pleasures of this kind of gardening. Goldfish also do well. Perhaps the greatest benefit of all, when you are fatigued from endless rounds of other gardening tasks, is that you never have to weed a water garden!

The Master Gardener Program is conducted through the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. Master Gardeners are volunteers with years of gardening experience who share their knowledge with others after completing a training program.

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