

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Backyard ponds and water gardens are gaining in popularity as new and innovative techniques dispel the bad rap once associated with water features. Today a water garden can be low maintenance and relatively affordable. Whether you build a pond into your landscape, use a barrel or patio container, the effects of a water garden on wildlife are remarkable. Water is a magnet for birds, butterflies, frogs, fish and insects such as dragonflies or damselflies. Choosing a spot for your pond requires some thought. Do not locate your pond too near trees. Most aquatic plants do best in full sun. Place the pond where you can view it from a patio or deck. The size of your pond depends on your personal preference. Although contrary to popular belief, large ponds do not need more maintenance than small ponds. In fact, a large pond is more likely to become ecologically balanced than a small one and therefore needs less attention. One that is too small cannot sustain long-term stability. Mature water gardens become stable as plants, bacteria colonies and other vital life become established.

One turnoff about tending a water garden is the dreaded green algae. Most believe you should never allow algae to grow in your pool. This is not entirely true. Some algae are beneficial. They provide food and oxygen for aquatic life. Over-production of algae occurs when a natural balance in the pond has not been achieved. That is, if there are too many fish in relation to the amount of plant material in the pond. A good rule of thumb is one inch of fish for every square foot of pond surface. Remember that fish grow and multiply. Plants should cover 50 to 70% of the pond surface to reduce light that promotes algae growth. Barley straw is a good natural algae fighter. As the straw breaks down it inhibits the growth of algae. It can be purchased from stores that specialize in pond equipment.

Pond liners are a necessity to keep water from seeping away no matter how compact your soil is. Rigid pond liners come in a variety of shapes but are usually quite small. If you want to design your own pond shape then consider a liner of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Cheaper plastic liners may work for a while but are not resistant to ultraviolet light and break down quickly. In addition, some plastics can be toxic to fish. A thicker liner is more resistant to puncture. Cement is also an option as a pond liner. This will probably be your largest expense as you install your water feature but well worth the cost. You can save labor and aggravation later in the case of an inferior liner being punctured or wearing out.

Whether you put costly koi or less expensive gold fish in your pond, it is wise to design it deep and wide enough to allow your fish to escape sharp-eyed predators. Place underwater tunnels, rock ledges, and sunken drain tiles for fish to explore and to hide in, when necessary. The main predators that most encounter are the great blue heron and raccoon. Raccoons do not like to swim for their food but prefer to fish from the pond edge. A pond at least 8 feet wide gives fish the chance to stay out of reach. Using a motion-activated scare that projects a spray of water when predators are near is another effective deterrent.

If you choose to install a full size pond or simply opt for a water bowl on your deck, it is a good idea to check out the many options available at local nurseries or landscape businesses that specialize in water features. Water, in its many forms, is a calming element in the garden and well worth incorporating into your landscape.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

