

Waterside Gardens

By Everett Chu
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Special opportunities for unique situations

A landscape is about sensory experience, and the presence of water is an important sensory element. It awakens the senses with its sound and movement. When a garden space seems devoid of interest, the addition of water features may create serenity, ease stress and enliven the space.

Water is a life force. Whether it flows through or covers a large expanse, or merely stands in a small basin, the body of water captures the sky in its reflection and unifies the landscape. Water's path forms lines that tie the garden together and invites the viewer to walk through and explore.

Soothing water sounds, whether from a fountain, a waterfall, nearby stream or sea tidal waves, mask the noise from beyond the garden and offer the illusion of remoteness. Even a dry streambed can make the viewer feel the living presence of water.

Whether manmade or natural, a water feature can be an important part of wildlife habitat. A birdbath in the back yard or a wildlife pond at the edge of the woodland can both be very valuable. Regardless of the types of water features, a waterside garden could be a unique situation that offers special opportunities.

Small Stand-Alone Water Features and Pools

Self-contained, built-in, pond-less water features are suitable for small spaces and is a delightful way to introduce moving water into the garden. They typically include a sump, a pump, a pipe and a spout and are simple to install. Some may be solar-powered.

In small gardens, water is best used formally, either as an adaptation to a building or its surrounding (such as a waterfall coming out of a spout on a stone wall) or as a sculpture feature (such as a freestanding fountain). The planting, if any, may be small in scale and confined to containers near the water feature.

Similarly, manmade pools may not carry any planting in the water body, although some large ornamental pools do have their own built-in planters. Including planting around the pools would significantly add aesthetic appeals. Avoid large overhanging trees that may shed leaves and contribute to higher maintenance.

Naturalistic Pond, Marsh, and Streamside

In a larger garden with more space, the water feature can be more informal, in free-form shapes imitating natural ponds.



A rock garden frames a naturalistic pool. Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

Moving water in a flowing stream shimmers and sparkles in the light. It is refreshing and adds interest. On the other hand, a still water body such as a pond provides extra benefits from its tranquility and its power to reflect waterside images.

The reflections unify the surrounding areas and create a spacious feeling from the light that it brings into the garden. To enhance the water's reflective quality, it is best to contain (surround) the water in darker-colored materials. A dark surround also better conceals the shallowness of the water and any plant containers that may be placed on the shelf of the pond.

To enhance the color from the reflection of the water, larger and darker-leaved plants may be used in the backdrop of the water body. If the sun ray does not directly strike the water surface, the color of the sky may appear a darker blue, adding vibrant interest.

Use moisture-loving plants to soften the edges of at least half of the pond. The shelf of marginal aquatic plants can provide shelter for wildlife. Ferns and ornamental grasses can be used to create a natural look.

The water's edge can harbor a diverse habitat when a wide variety of plants flourish in varied elevation. Select plants according to their microclimate preference and arrange them to add desired height, texture and dimension, making the waterside a garden oasis in all seasons.

To preserve the serenity and tranquility, keep plantings simple—using fewer varieties but more repetitions; avoid too many or scattered bold colors. This style would be natural and informal. If the setting is woodland, the use native or native-like plants would be more preferred.



Left: A seaside garden seasonally inundated by wind and salt spray. **Right:** Pond-less fountain in a seaside garden. *Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Seacoast

A seaside garden often must endure the lingering damage from strong wind, salt spray and summer drought. Trees may develop a windswept form as a result, and all plants will have to survive the soil salinity and salt residue on their leaves.

Depending on the elevation of the garden above the high-water mark, the need to keep the area open and preserve the water view, the garden is often left to fend for itself.

The following is a sample list of plants suitable for the seaside garden, but most are also suitable for the other waterside gardens (though not in the boggy areas):

- *Alchemilla mollis* (lady's mantle)
- *Achillea millefolium* (yarrow)
- *Agapanthus* spp. (lily of the Nile)
- *Agastache* spp. (hyssop)
- *Arbutus unedo* (strawberry tree)
- *Armeria maritima* (sea thrift)
- *Artemisia* x 'Powis Castle' (Powis castle artemisia)
- *Carex comans* 'Frosted Curls' (New Zealand hairy sedge)
- *Cistus* x *pulverulentus* 'Sunset' (rockrose)
- *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* 'Victoria' (California lilac)
- *Corokia cotoneaster* (wire netting bush)
- *Cotoneaster dammeri* (cotoneaster groundcover)
- *Dianthus* 'Fire Star' (red garden pinks)
- *Elaeagnus* x *ebbingei* 'Gilt Edge' (golden variegated silverberry)
- *Erigeron speciosus* 'Darkest of All' (seaside daisy)
- *Eryngium* 'Jade Frost' (sea holly)

- *Erysimum* 'Apricot Twist' (shrubby wallflowers)
- *Hemerocallis* 'Stella d' Oro' (dwarf yellow daylily)
- *Hydrangea serrata* (mountain hydrangea)
- *Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star' (blue star juniper)
- *Kniphofia* 'Echo Rojo' (red hot poker)
- *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' (English lavender)
- *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Becky' (Shasta daisy)
- *Lonicera pileata* (Privet Honeysuckle)
- *Miscanthus oligostachyus* 'Purpurascens' (purple maiden grass)
- *Myrica californica* (Pacific wax myrtle)
- *Nassella tenuissima* (Mexican feather grass)
- *Pachysandra terminalis* (Japanese spurge)
- *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' (fountain grass)
- *Perovskia atriplicifolia* 'Little Spire' (Russian sage)
- *Phlomis russeliana* (Russel's Jerusalem sage)
- *Phormium* spp. (New Zealand flax)
- *Pinus* spp (pine)
- *Polystichum munitum* (western sword fern)
- *Rhus aromatica* 'Gro-Low' (gro-low fragrant sumac)
- *Rosa rugosa* (rugosa rose)
- *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Arp' (rosemary)
- *Rudbeckia fulgida* 'Goldsturm' (black-eyed Susan)
- *Santolina chamaecyparissus* (lavender cotton)
- *Sedum divergens* (cascade mounding stonecrop)
- *Vaccinium ovatum* (evergreen huckleberry)
- *Viburnum davidii* (David viburnum)

Resources:

- ***The Less is More Garden: Big Ideas for Designing Your Small Yard.*** Susan Morrison, Timber Press. 2018.
- ***The Ultimate Garden Designer: The Next Best Thing to Hiring a Garden Designer.*** Tim Newbury, Ward Lock Wellington House. 2010.
- ***The Essential Garden Design Workbook.*** Rosemary Alexander, Timber Press. 2009.
- ***The Garden Maker's Manual.*** Rosemary Alexander and Richard Sneesby, Timber Press. 2005.