



Sharon's Plants, Ltd.
41-614 Waikupanaha St.
Waimanalo, HI 96795

Water Gardening 101

All you add is water. That's pretty much what it takes to become a successful container water gardener. Incredibly, small pots filled with water plants take care of themselves most of the time, as long as you keep adding fresh water. The plants, still in individual pots, derive most of their nutrients from the garden soil they're planted in. Can you think of a more ideal way to garden?

In truth, you do have to do a few things from time to time in addition to adding water — keep on the lookout for algae, occasionally divide overgrown bog plants and scrub out the pot from time to time. But when you think of it — there's no ground to till, no weeds to fight, no need to add mulch and compost.

Water in a garden of any size creates an oasis not only for you but also for birds, dragonflies and small fish. Pond pots nestle nicely in small spaces such as balconies or decks but they can also be tucked into nooks and crannies in spacious gardens. All that's needed is a small non-draining, non-porous pot and a few water plants.

Selecting the Perfect Pond Pot

It's no surprise that you'll need a pot that holds water. Many pond pots are made of ceramic, plastic, sealed cement, porcelain or metal. Old crocks and wash tubs, plastic pots also make excellent pond pots.

Be creative when selecting a pot. Even an old-fashioned claw foot tub can be adapted for a big pond-in-a-pot.

Avoid using wood containers, such as wine and whiskey barrels, as they may contain bacteria that are harmful to plants and fish. If a wood container is just what you've been dreaming of, line it with a heavy-gauge plastic bag or a pre-formed plastic liner.

The size of your pond pot depends upon the size of your space and the number of plants to be inserted into the pot. Four to five plants fill a pot that is about 16 inches in diameter and about 12 inches deep. However, even one small water plant in a corresponding decorative pot can invite harmony.

Art and Science of Water Gardens: Plant Habits and Varieties

Pond pots are created by utilizing the various types of water plants- floating leaf aquatics, oxygenating grasses, bog and marginal water plant species. They all thrive in water but have different growing habits and water depth requirements.

Floaters. Floating plants such as water hyacinth and water lettuce help reduce algae in the water garden. Water hyacinths reproduce rapidly; you may need to cull some of the plants from time to time. If you live in a warm climate, don't throw water hyacinths into open water such as canals, ponds, etc.; it's an invasive plant.

Oxygenating grasses. Most oxygenating grasses grow submerged deeply in water and either sit at the bottom of the pot or float on the water's surface. Oxygenating grasses help maintain the proper pH balance of the pond pot's water. Examples: anacharis (*Egeria densa*), fanwort (*Cabomba caroliniana*), feather grass and blood grass.

Bog plants. Water in the pond pot should just cover a bog plant's soil. That's because bog plants grow naturally in shallow water at a pond's perimeter. In a pond pot it may be necessary to set bog plants on top of rocks or small inverted pots to create a more shallow water environment.

Marginals. Marginal water plants grow 1 to 12 inches underwater in the margins of ponds, between the shore and deeper water. Marginal plants are favorites in small pond pots and usually sit at the bottom of the pot. Examples: horsetail and yellow iris (*Iris pseudacorus*).

Deep-water plants. Some plants like water lilies need deep water — at least one foot of water above their roots, and they need a few square feet in which to spread their foliage. To grow one of these well, you'll want an extra large container.

Assembling your container water garden

You will want to either set up your water pot before you purchase your water plants or provide buckets of water for them to stay in while you set up. Water lilies, oxygenating plants, and floating water plants cannot be out of water for very long or they will decline. If you have a container ready and go straight home with your water plant purchases and put them in water, they will be fine.

After filling your container with clean water you will want to slowly submerge your water lily in the water. It is a good idea to cover the top of the soil in all of your potted water plants with a fine layer of gravel to help keep the soil in. If your water lily doesn't reach the surface of the water when submerged don't worry. Water lily pads will keep growing until they reach the surface of the water. If they are just too deep you can add bricks under the submerged pot and remove it what the pads have stretched to the desired height. Likewise a water lily that has been growing in deeper water will adjust to the new water surface and become more compact quite quickly.

Location and Selection of Plants

When selecting water plants for your pond pot, consider the lighting conditions where the pond pot will reside. Morning sun or protected, partially sunny spots are optimal locations. This mild environment protects water plants from the intense heat of afternoon sun that can burn and harm the plants (and certainly threaten any fish). Tall horsetail rush, umbrella palm and floating water hyacinth are perfect partners for a partially sunny location.

The most visually pleasing pond pots are created by mixing both horizontal and vertical growing plants. Short and tall varieties simply make the display more interesting.

Try not to overstuff your pond-in-a-pot. A bit of empty water space keeps the arrangement from appearing over-crowded, and the simplicity of just a few plants lends itself to a peaceful pot, the idea behind water gardening.

Pond Pot Maintenance

Amazingly and wonderfully, a pond in a pot requires a minimum of maintenance. Use fertilizer sparingly; water plants get many of the nutrients they need from the pond water and the soil they are growing in. Water garden fertilizer is in tablet form and the tablet can be tucked into the bottom of a water plant's soil.

There are a few chores in maintaining a healthy pond pot, but none of them will keep you busy. Algae could be your chief problem, but it needs light and nutrients to thrive, so keep some floaters on the surface to cut down on light, carefully limit the amount and type of fertilizer you use, and include some submerged plants, which compete well with algae.

Every once in a while drain the pond pot. You'll know it's time when two inches of decomposed matter accumulates on the bottom of the pond pot. At this time also scrub the inside surfaces of the water pot with a stiff brush. At this time, divide the plants if necessary. If the need to divide does arise, use clay garden soil for repotting or purchase water-plant soil. The wonderful bonus of dividing is that now you have free plants in which to create another dazzling pond in a pot.

Frequently asked questions

Will I get a mosquito problem if I have a water garden?

As long as you have fish in your water garden, mosquitoes won't be a problem as your fish will eat the mosquito larvae.

What kind of fish do I need?

Guppies, Mollies, or Mosquito fish are a great option for container water gardens.

My water lilies have flowers that are not opening and rotting off. What is causing this?

Most likely what you are finding are not buds but closed flowers that have finished their bloom cycle. A water lily will open during the day and close at night. It repeats this for three days and is done blooming. The closed flower will drop into the water until it decays and breaks apart in the water.

I leave for work early and get home late so I never get to see my water lilies bloom. Are there any that bloom at night?

Yes! We carry night blooming water lilies that open as soon as it gets dark and stays open till about 10:00 in the morning. If you sit out on your lanai at night or in the morning, this is a great choice. Night bloomers are large water lilies so choose a pot large enough to accommodate it.

How often do I need to change the water in my container water garden?

Water garden containers need to establish a balance in the water to keep from being overtaken by algae. Changing the water frequently upsets this balance. I've had containers of water lilies with fish that have gone years without being changed. Over time, sediment will form from the decaying leaves and flowers of your water plants on the bottom of your container. When the level of sediment becomes too deep, you can empty out your container and start over. Often you will find your water lilies have escaped your pot by then and need dividing or repotting.

If I'm not going to change the water frequently, how do I keep my water clear?

Adding anacharis is a great way to clarify your water. The anacharis grows above the sediment allowing debris to filter through to the bottom but uses the same nutrients in the water that algae depend on. Your oxygenating plants will essentially starve the algae off. The surface of your water appears clear. An added benefit of anacharis or other oxygenating plants is that they provide shelter where your small fish can seek shade and protection from larger fish.

How do I divide and repot my water plants?

For most bog plants such as Papyrus, Thalia and Juncus, you will eventually need to divide or thin out these plants. Use a sharp knife and cut down the middle of the entire root ball to divide. You can replant both halves in separate containers if desired. If you discard any water plants, please do it properly. All water plants have the potential to be invasive in marsh or bodies of water.



For water lilies and bog plants, use straight dirt (they aren't particular about what type) Potting mix contains ingredients such as bits of wood chip, cinder or perlite that will float to the surface of your water garden.

