

# THE Enabled Gardener

## WATER GARDENING IN CONTAINERS

by Josh Spece

### Container water gardens are for everyone!

“Wow!” is a common response from visitors the first time they visit my ponds. Often, the next phrase out of their mouths is, “I wish I had room for a water garden.” True, you may not be able to have a dramatic waterfall and a meandering stream on a small city lot, but everyone, even an apartment or condo dweller, has room for a “water garden.”

Container water gardens or tub ponds are the perfect choice for cramped quarters. Easy to set up and maintain, they are ideal for the elderly and anyone with physical limitations. None of the components in a container water garden is terribly heavy, and the entire thing can be easily drained and disassembled if necessary.

Ideally, locate your tub pond where it will receive at least six hours of direct sun. This allows you to grow the widest variety of plants. A little afternoon shade is fine and helps pre-

vent the water from over-heating during hot spells. If you don't have a sunny area, you can still have a delightful tub garden...but with shade-tolerant plants. A fairly level location allows you to easily see and enjoy your little oasis. A sturdy garden chair or a patio table puts a small container within easy reach for someone who can't bend over or who is in a wheelchair.



Many dwarf aquatic plants are available for even the smallest of containers.



Containers allow aquatic plants to become part of your landscape.



Larry Leone in Dallas, TX, made this self-contained water feature.



Large terra cotta pots can be used for aquatics if they are sealed on the inside.

to keep the container's nutrient levels in check and to prevent algae growth.

- Choose plants that are in scale with your

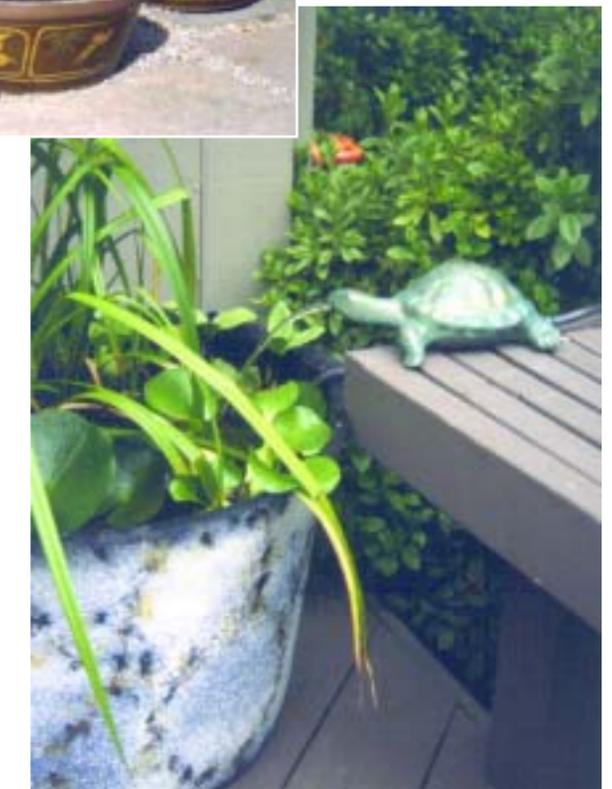
tiered water garden can be created with whiskey barrel liners that have a built-in spillway.

Once your container is in place and filled with water, the fun begins... planting! There are no rules set in stone when it comes to planting your container garden, but there are a few guidelines that will get you off to a good start.

- Choose plants that are adapted to the sun or shade conditions of your tub garden's site.
- Use bricks or overturned flowerpots to adjust the plants to their preferred depths.
- Include a bunch of submerged aquatic grasses

Any container will work as a mini-water garden, so long as it holds water. Pick a container that is decorative and fits in with the overall feel of your garden. A container 18-24" in diameter gives you enough room for several different plants, but even an 8" flower pot offers enough room for a tiny water lily.

Some of my favorite container water gardens are made in the new foam-plastic flower pots that appear to be aged terra cotta (real terra cotta pots need to be sealed). They are also very light weight when empty. Half whiskey barrels are probably the most popular and the most commonly available in garden centers. They must be lined with either flexible pond liner or a regular whiskey barrel liner to keep the wood from leaching toxic materials into the water. A two-



You can still have the sound of water with container ponds!

container. Smaller growing or dwarf varieties of common, larger plants are best for tub gardens.

- Choose plant forms that contrast with each other. An upright plant (iris), a mounding plant (water celery) and a surface growing plant (water lily) make a pleasing combination.
- A single, large plant is just as attractive as a grouping of smaller plants. A favorite of mine is a lotus in an attractive container with parrot's feather draping over the side of the pot.
- Plants grow! Don't try to grow too many different plants in your container water garden, and don't be afraid to prune them to keep everyone happy.



Larger aquatic plants can be displayed as specimens in their own "pond-pots."

After the plants are in place, add the finishing touches to your tub garden. While fish add movement to your garden, they aren't suited for every container garden. I would not keep fish in a container much smaller than a half whiskey barrel and even then would limit their number to only one or two small goldfish. If you



Use blocks, bricks, or milk crates to elevate shallow water marginals to their proper water depth in a tub garden.

choose not to include fish, use a mosquito donut to prevent mosquitoes from reproducing. If you want the soothing effect of running water, install a small pump and fountain or spouting ornament. (Be sure to locate your garden near a power source if you plan on running a pump.)

Maintaining your tub garden in tiptop shape takes minimal time. The most important task is fertilizing the plants regularly to keep them growing and blooming. I recommend feeding water lilies every two weeks and foliage plants once a month throughout the summer with aquatic fertilizer tablets. Remove dying leaves and faded flowers regularly and prune excess growth to keep everything in bounds. If you have fish, a light feeding a couple times a week



Set a "pond-pot" next to your front entry.



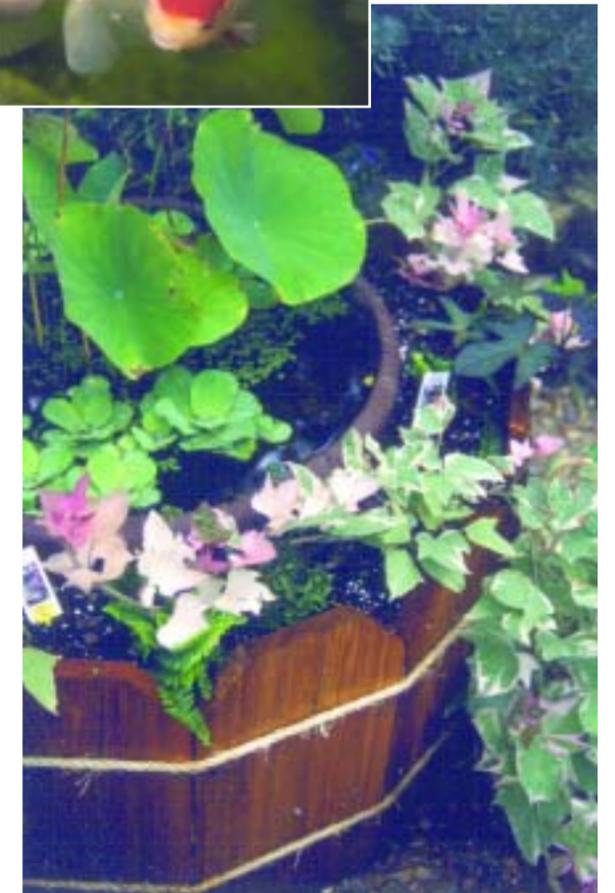
Small fish, such as fantail and oranda goldfish are suited to life in a container pond.

is appreciated and entertaining.

When water evaporates from your little pond, top it off as needed. Remember, however, to treat the added water for chlorine if you add more than 10% of the container's water volume. Even if you don't have fish, chlorine can burn aquatic plants.

Once you envision all the possibilities, you'll be setting up container water gardens throughout your garden. These inexpensive mini-ponds bring all the joys of a full-scale pond within everyone's reach. ♡

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Create a pond within a larger container, backfill around it with soil, and grow a terrestrial frame for your aquatic plants.

# It's a SMALL SMALL SMALL World

by Linda Siler

Unlike terrestrial gardeners who attack plant-thinning chores with a vengeance, pruning and pulling and tossing the excess onto the compost pile, water gardeners cannot part with their vigorously growing plants. A bucket, a tub, a watertight pot, an old sink – all become homes for the overflow. Purposefully setting up container water gardens is inevitable. Whatever the container, its only requirement is that it not leak. Whether the container is shallow or fitted with makeshift pedestals, the only design mandate is that the plants be in scale to the container. With water gardens in containers, it is a small small small world, but let's look at color selections for these special water ventures.

Is tranquil blue your color? The dwarf-type tropical water lily, 'Charles Thomas' displays charming 5-6-inch flowers and purple-mottled pads. Of course, 'Dauben' is the most commonly available with its pale blue flowers that fade to nearly white. Any blue tropical offers a bonus of blooms in partial shade plus a prolonged sea-



*Bacopa*, a tropical plant, produces lovely purple-blue blooms all summer long.

son with more cold tolerance than other tropicals. Place your dwarf type lilies with 8 to 18 inches of water over their crowns. For height in the container, the mop-headed, 12-18-inch tall Papyrus also lends grace and texture to the composition. Since the plant requires shallow water, use bricks or an overturned flower pot to elevate the potted plant to a 2 to 4-inch water depth. Floating plants complete your arrangement. Functioning much like groundcovers in the terrestrial garden, they fill in and frame the specimen plants. Water hyacinths do especially

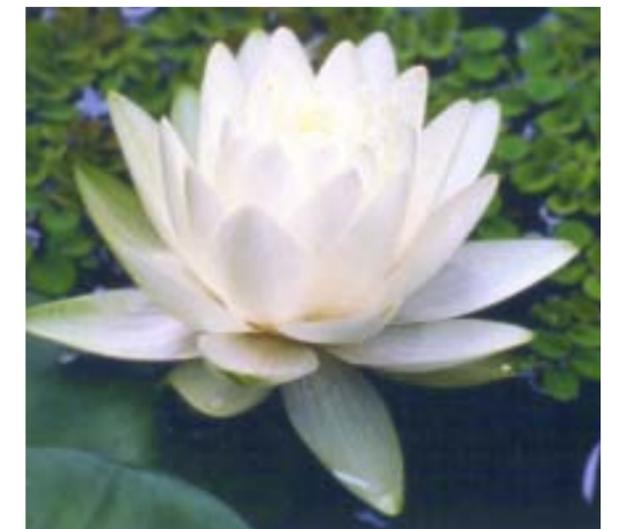


Lush parrot's feather adds lush texture to the edge of your container garden.

well in containers since they tend to bloom better under crowded conditions. Their bulbous air pockets keep the plants afloat, and the ephemeral, lavender blooms with cheery peacock eyes are a delight. An alternative "ground cover" in your container is *Bacopa* with its low-growing and scrambling tumble of leaves bespeckled with charming purplish-blue blooms. Want a touch more texture to your arrangement? Try the lime-green freshness and lush, feathery texture of parrot's feather draping over the edge of your container. This lush plant can be grown potted or floating freely in the water. This blue-toned container arrangement enjoys 4 to 6 hours of direct sunlight. Since all of the plant selections are tropical, temperate gardens can enjoy them throughout the winter indoors under supplemental lighting.

Is pink your color of choice? The true dwarf

water lily 'Joanne Pring' is perfect for even very small containers, presenting both flowers and pads only 2-4 inches across. 'Pink Opal,' with slightly cup-shaped coral pink blooms is a dwarf-type hardy that performs well in a tub-size container. For vertical accent, the grassy, dwarf Japanese sweet flag (*Acorus gramineus*) offers selections in cream and green stripes or in yellow and green stripes (*A.g.* 'Ogon'). The variegated foliage in these plants, of course, adds a sparkling life to the arrangement. Growing only to 18 inches tall, these miniature sweet flags bear a small, inconspicuous brown poker bloom. Grow them with 2 to 6 inches of water over their pots. A most charming edger plant for this arrangement is the summer-long blooming water forget-me-not (*Myosotis palustris*). Attaining but 6 to 8 inches in height, the delicate, tiny blue flowers smile with bright yellow centers. Set the plant with 2 to 4 inches of water over the pot. The plants in this arrangement will do well in 4-6 hours of direct sunlight. Since they are all hardy perennials, you'll provide non-freezing dormancy storage in the winter.



'Gonnere' is a pristine white lily of small habit, well-suited to tub gardens.

Do you find yourself tucking in bright red geraniums around your patio and garden? Red can be the theme of your container water garden, too. The hardy 'Perry's Baby Red' is a prolific bloomer with 3-4-inch blooms. Grow it in 12-18 inches of water depth. To highlight the red, tuck in a container of 'Crushed Ice' *Sagittarius*. A variegated member of the hardy arrowhead family, its bright green, lance-shaped leaves are splattered with white. Papery white blooms add further summer charm to this 18-inch-tall plant. Grow it with 4-6 inches of water over its pot. For an especially festive touch, use the variegated form of *Houttuynia*, commonly known as chameleon plant, with yellow-, red-, white-, and green-splashed leaves scrambling to six inches tall across the water. Dainty white flower petals surround prominent poker centers for further interest. Unlike the shade-loving, common green form of *Houttuynia*, the chameleon plant is happiest with 4 to 6 hours of sunlight. Set it in shallow water of only 1-2 inch-



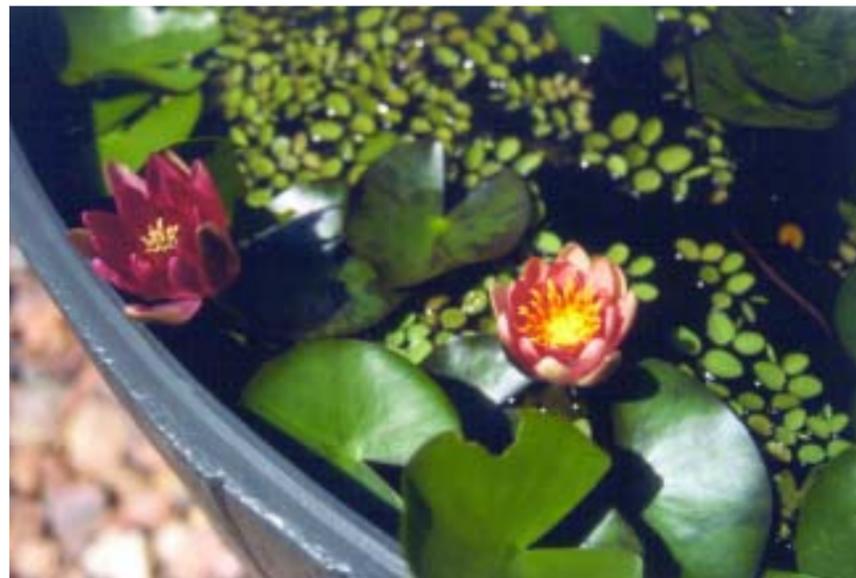
'Chromatella' has been around for years, but it still is a reliable selection for small ponds. Photo by Perry D. Slocum

es over the pot's top. Give this container of plants 4-6 hours of direct sun.

Gardeners in the hot South, such as in Florida, Texas, and the Southwestern states, face special heat problems with container water gardens. Even tropical aquatic plants do not appreciate water temperatures in the nineties. Plants may express their displeasure by wilting or shutting down. The solution, of course, is to

set your container gardens in shady sites. Whatever your garden climate, you may still be faced with shady areas that beg for the spark of a container garden. The good news is there are aquatic plants for shady conditions.

The small tropical lily, 'Dauben,' blooms well with only 2 hours of sunlight and has been known to bloom in shade with strong indirect light. While it fades to white in sunlight, the shadier conditions seem to



(above) 'Paul Harlot' is a sunset or changeable, dwarf-type, hardy water lily. Opening yellow, it eventually changes to red by the end of its bloom period. (opposite page) 'Perry's Baby Red' is a prolific bloomer for the tub garden. Photo by Perry D. Slocum





The variegated form of *Houttuynia* is known as the chameleon plant for its vibrant colors produced in sunny conditions.

encourage a stronger blue in the petals. The hardy lily, 'Gonnere,' is a dwarf-type, pristine white bloomer that brightens a shady corner with elegance. Vertical accents for the small container can include dwarf sweet flag or dwarf cattail. For the larger container, the new multi-colored *Alocasia* with 8-10-inch wide, arrow-shaped leaves in pink, green, yellow, and maroon provides an amazing color splash in the



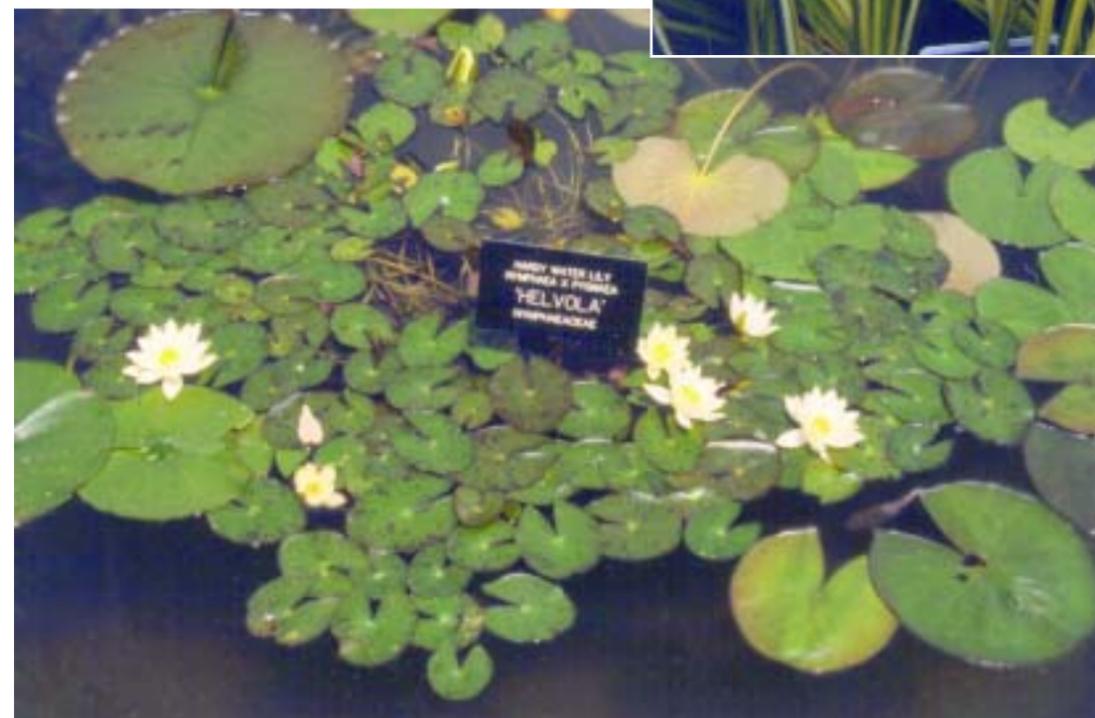
'Berit Strawn' is small enough for use in a shallow dish garden. Photo by Perry D. Slocum

shade. Grow this tropical plant with 4-6 inches of water over its pot. Lend the container texture with the silvery green creased petals of floating water lettuce. For 'groundcover' or edging, include a pot of creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia numularia*). Rounded, dark lime green leaves poise opposite each other along the plant's scrambling stems. Dainty yellow flowers brighten the plant in early summer. Grow it in only 1-3 inches of water. Of course, you can try growing parrot's feather in a shady container, too. One of the fun aspects of container water gardens is that they are moveable — either the entire container or the single potted plants. Experiment! If a plant is not happy in the container's site, it is a simple matter to move it elsewhere.

The best and most enjoyable way to select plants for your containers is to browse through the aquatic plant department at your local water garden nursery or garden center. Look for

plants with foliage and blooms in proportion to the container they will claim as home. You may find the cheery dwarf hardy water lily, 'Helvola,' with its silver-dollar sized mottled leaves. Look for dwarf horsetail (*Equisetum scorpioides*) – its narrow, grasslike, hollow stems growing in faux bamboo style with dark bands and tips. Corkscrew rush (*Scirpus spiralis*) displays fascinating twisted and tangled prostrate growth. You might even find the micro-mini sweetflag, a grassy variegated foliage plant that grows only 6-8 inches tall. Before you know it, you'll have container water gardens throughout your garden and tucked into every corner of your patio, porch, and deck!☺

Linda Siler is the president of the Springfield Watergarden Society in Springfield, Missouri, where she manages O'Quinn's Orchids and Water Gardens.



(top) Dwarf sweet flag, such as this *Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon,' provide vertical accent to the container pond. (bottom) Compare the size of the pygmy 'Helvola' with the larger leaves of a standard water lily.