

TURNING WATER INTO *Dollars*

As the water gardening fad has begun to show some significant staying power, both retail employees and customers have become better educated, making pond profits easier to come by.

By Jeff Rugg

Retailers of the relatively new field of water gardening are wondering if it's just a fad, or if it's here to stay. Should the water garden sales area be expanded or left alone? What new products should be introduced? What are the trends they should be watching and adding to produce more profit? Here, we'll address some of those questions and hopefully help you find the answers.

EDUCATION AND DEMONSTRATION

Education in the store starts with good signage and labeling of plant material. It continues with handouts and brochures, but it is most fulfilled through in-house seminars. Some will install the pond themselves and others will hire out to have someone else do it. Stores that have pond installation crews usually realize additional landscape installation sales of more plants and hardscapes like patios, bridges, decks and lighting.

You may not have to have a display rose garden to sell roses, but it would probably help. It definitely helps to have a demonstration water garden on the premises. Not only does it help as a sales tool, but it helps by forcing the employees to maintain it. They can then become knowledgeable water garden experts. It helps to demonstrate how the filters are maintained, how the plants will look and how the whole pond can be incorporated into the landscape.

In the past, many garden centers displayed a few water lilies and some shoreline plants in a few black tubs. Now, garden centers that are really doing well selling plants are building raised tables that hold a few inches of water for the shoreline plants and up to eighteen inches of water for the lilies. The plants are being displayed so they sell better and are easier for store personnel to take care of.

Also in the past, there were few varieties of water plants offered. Now, there are dozens. Customers are seeing new varieties in magazines and on Web sites. They are interested in getting new colors of lilies, iris and lotus. The newest varieties of lotus, cannas and other plants have colorful foliage so there is color even when the plant is not in bloom.

SOPHISTICATION, STATUARY AND...FISH

The trend over the last few years has been away from small, preformed starter ponds to larger, flexible liner water gardens. Many of these ponds have rocks and gravel areas so plants can be planted directly into the stones, rather than left in the pot. Many people installing these larger ponds want them to look more mature than a plant in a 2-inch pot or 1-gallon container can offer. They are looking for shoreline plants to be in 2- to 5-gallon containers.

Retail garden centers usually get into water gardening with the plants, then the hard goods and finally after a couple of years, they start selling fish. Fish are a specialty item that need trained employees. They are often a high-profit item, but there is the risk of losing whole batches of fish from disease problems. As the pond industry has matured, more "plant-oriented" stores are starting to sell fish and frogs.

As gardeners begin staying home and spending more time and money in the home and garden, they are also spending more on artwork. Art in the garden used to be inexpensive statues of garden gnomes, but some people are spending a lot more on bronze fountains, granite Japanese lanterns and teak benches.

GETTING STARTED

Several manufacturers offer pond kits that include all the necessary parts to install a water garden. Kits make it easy for the retailer to sell a pond and easy for the pond owner to be sure they are buying all the properly sized parts.

To learn more you should attend one of the two Pondapalooza events. They are the only national conferences focusing on all aspects of the water garden industry. This year the East Coast version is July 19-21 in Altoona, Pa.; Pondapalooza West is Aug 19-21 in Portland, Ore. For more information call *Pond Keeper Magazine* at (814) 695-4325. Also, visit other garden centers who have already taken the plunge into water gardening, or visit the virtual pond school at www.pondsupplies.com. Subscribe to *Water Garden Magazine* at (219) 374-9419 or *WaterShapes Magazine* at (818) 715-9776. Order Pond Design and Water Garden Maintenance videos from PondSweep Manufacturing at (866) 754-6766. Order the 12-page color reprint of two articles from *Pond Keeper Magazine*, titled "Merchandising Water Garden Products," by Jeff Rugg, at (888) 742-5772.

Jeff Rugg works in technical help for Pond Supplies of America in Yorkville, Ill. He has degrees in science, zoology, horticulture and landscape architecture, and has managed garden centers in Texas and Illinois and owned a water garden and wild bird nature store. He may be reached by phone at (630) 553-0033 or via E-mail at

