



can selling water gardens be profitable?

How water gardens can bring more customers and ideas to your garden centers.

By Bill Hoffman

Nine years ago, I debated whether I should handle more water gardening products — at least more than five pumps, two pillbox-size filters, two liners and a few other miscellaneous products. Some of my garden center customers had been asking for other pond products and aquatic plants that I didn't stock, or know much about. That winter, I made the commitment (or at least I thought so) and ordered approximately twice as many pumps, filters, liners, etc. Then, I really became daring and ordered some bare root (not much else was available back then) water lilies, marginal plants and a few other aquatic plants.

Unfortunately, when these plants arrived in the spring, I was not prepared for them or prepared to sell water gardening. Despite customer interest, I knew so little about water gardening, and the aquatic plants were so anemic, that sales were less than brisk. I immediately recognized that there was not enough interest in water gardening to justify the embarrassment or the financial loss. No, not really! Actually, I realized that I had not prepared myself adequately. The water gardening department would have to wait until I could commit myself and the store's resources to doing it correctly.

ONE YEAR LATER

One year passed without water gardening, and I would not make the same mistake twice. The next year, I made a real commitment. I perused many water gardening books and magazines, and suppliers and potential suppliers were very supportive and forth-coming with additional information and direction. I also gathered information on what and how to give a water gardening seminar. Finally, I invested more than \$10,000 in water gardening inventory and the construction of a display pond. By May, the display pond was running, the shelves were stocked, customers were inquiring about water gardening products and sales were being made.

In mid-June, we held our first water gardening seminar with approximately 10 people in attendance. Boy, did I sweat. I didn't know the answers to many of the questions, but I took phone numbers, found the answers and forwarded the information. Good old customer service. The person who learned the most about water gardening at those seminars was me! With each question that I had to search for the answer, I became more comfortable with water gardening.



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The more I learned, the more I understood that not knowing an answer was nothing to be embarrassed about. There are many variables in a pond's ecosystem. To answer most customer questions, whether it concerns picking the right components to build a pond or correcting a problem (imbalance) with the ecosystem, you have to have an understanding of nature and the pond's ecosystem. I've learned that mastering water gardening will be an ongoing, never-ending process.

LEARNING THE TRADE

As my understanding of water gardening grew, I realized that the big box stores would probably never dominate in sales of water gardening products. Most big box stores in the North will not dedicate a "pond knowledgeable" person to such a seasonal department. Visits by myself and several of my associates to these types of stores have confirmed my suspicions. People with little or no knowledge were manning and answering questions (incorrectly for the most part) in the water gardening area of these stores.

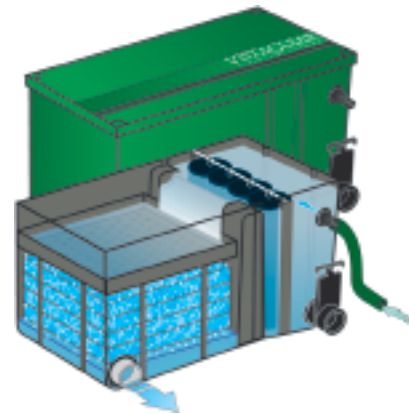
Misinformed customers from the big box stores often sought out our store looking for knowledgeable guidance. By the end of our first year of seriously committed water gardening, retail sales were in excess of \$40,000. The second year, retail sales were more than \$80,000, with margins well over 50 percent. This niche market was truly worth capitalizing on. Retail sales continued to grow between 23 and 75 percent for four more years until 2002, when the weather and economy took their toll. New pond sales declined in 2002, while maintenance products such as fish food and water additives continued to climb. A Tannton Press survey printed in *USA Today* on July 11, 2002, said, "If Americans enhance homes, one thing homeowners would add: water feature/pond — 16 percent; deck — 16 percent; pool — 15 percent; patio — 11 percent; garden — 10 percent; and porch — 10 percent."

As the survey shows, the business is in water gardening. A water gardening department can be one of the most profitable in your store. Profit margins are excellent, competition is sparse and interest is growing in leaps and bounds. The water gardening season is also unique — starting in March and usually going until Christmas, when gifts of ponds, statuary and gift certificates are purchased. One other benefit of selling water gardening is additional sales from cross selling. Once the pond is built, it needs landscaping and decorations.

If you're asking yourself, "Should we be selling water gardening products, or why aren't our sales doing well?" then ask yourself, "Have I made the commitment, and do I have the right attitude?" As a friend of mine from another garden center told me years ago, "If you want to be successful with a new product or with a new department, go all the way. Jump in and make the commitment or stay away from it." As with everything in life, half-hearted efforts don't produce success, whether it is on the sports field, at home or in business.

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Pond filter

With a filtration capacity of up to 2,000 gal., the VistaClear's novel, two-chamber, wet/dry design offers excellent performance while occupying less than half the space of other filters. An independent mechanical filtration and quick-open drain valve allow for easy cleaning. Available in four colors, VistaClear is made from sturdy, roto-molded polyethylene and features a lifetime filter body guarantee. Patio Ponds Ltd. (301) 874-8440. **Write in 1411**

UV clarifier

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Pond Filtration Inc. (888) 766-3217. **Write in 1413**



Fish house

Nycon's molded plastic Koi Kastle protects fish from predators and provides much-needed shade. The Koi Kastle resembles a small boulder and adds to the natural appearance of your pond. Nycon Products. (800) 524-9266. **Write in 1410**



Bactericide

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