

# Water Gardening

## — 10 Myths: 10 Facts

Learn how to debunk some of the crazy things customers believe about water gardening.

By Kelly Tunney

**B**ackyard ponds and water gardens have always had a bad reputation, and for a while they deserved it. The methods and technology that built the ponds of yesterday often yielded high-maintenance monsters that sucked in time and money much more quickly and efficiently than their debris-clogged pumps sucked in water.

Today, all that has changed. Thanks to new techniques and technologies, a backyard water garden can be a low-maintenance personal paradise. Still, ponding myths persist that may unnecessarily discourage those pining for a water garden of their own.

### MYTHS AND FACTS

**Myth: Small water features are less work.** Quite the opposite — as water features get larger they become easier to maintain. Aquarium hobbyists know it's much easier to achieve a healthy, stable tank with more water, not less. Small water features rarely have the flow or capacity necessary for long-term stability and soon need lots of maintenance. However, properly

designed ponds are able to achieve ecological balance. As water gardens become larger, they also become more stable, and with each passing year — as plants, bacteria colonies and other vital life becomes established — the pond requires less maintenance.

**Myth: You should never have algae in your pond.** Not true — green algae, in proper proportion, is beneficial plant life. Fish eat algae, and it's part of the ecology of any living, healthy pond. Pristine, UV-sterilized or chemically-treated water is dead by comparison. Too much algae has a simple cause: too much sunlight. That's why a well-designed natural pond includes shade sources from landscaping and aquatic plants.

**Myth: Maintaining a water garden is a constant headache.** It doesn't have to be. Ecologically-balanced water gardens let Mother Nature do the heavy lifting. Make sure the water garden you install works with Mother Nature, not against her. Top-quality ecosystem pond kits include mechanical and biological filtration, lots of aquatic plants, fish, active bacteria and plenty of rocks. No water testing, no chemicals, no clogged-up filter screens, no standing water and no mucky bottom that

needs constant draining and cleaning.

**Myth: Ponds need daily water testing and corrective treatment.** The fact is, if the pond is not chemically dependent, there's nothing to test for. Mother Nature never tests her water. And, she doesn't use any store-bought chemicals or pharmaceuticals. Stick to the program of ecosystem water gardening and let the pond grow healthy on its own.

**Myth: To keep fish, water gardens need to be deep.** Just how deep is "deep"? In this case, two feet deep is as good as a mile. Fish, including koi, hibernate in ponds just 2-feet deep through winters as cold as Minnesota's Zone 4 bone chillers. A small circulating agitator pump and heater are all you need to keep a "breathing hole" in the ice and oxygenate the water for your fish.

**Myth: Water features are breeding grounds for mosquitoes.** Sure, mosquitoes breed in still, standing water, but a well-designed backyard water garden has lots of water flow, in which mosquitoes don't like to



Photo courtesy of Aquascape Designs



breed. Also, ponds and water gardens support fish, frogs, toads and other wildlife that are natural predators of mosquitoes.

**Myth: Water gardening involves a lot of hard work.** Not necessarily. A well-designed ecologically balanced pond needs only a scoop of powder or liquid bacteria every month or so, the skimmer basket cleaned weekly, plus an annual clean-out in cold climates. In gardening terms, an ecologically balanced pond is about as much work as maintaining an established perennial border, minus the weeding and watering. Aquatic plants water themselves. The big maintenance item is a recommended annual spring clean out. Many opt for a contractor to do the spring cleaning (\$200-300).

**Myth: A water garden costs a fortune.** A water garden is certainly an investment, but it no longer has to be a money pit. At the most affordable end of the spectrum, DIY kits with everything included retail for \$700-900, plus another \$600 for the large or live stuff that doesn't come in the box (rocks, pebbles, fish, plants, etc.). Total: \$1,300-1,500, plus a healthy amount of sweat equity for an 8x11-foot pond and waterfall. Professional installations start at approximately \$4,000 and average \$6,000-8,000. Inexpensive fish and plants are easily found. Running a high-efficiency pump all day, every day will add about \$30-40 onto a monthly electric bill. Low-maintenance water gardens are considered good landscaping investments that can pay for themselves in increased home equity.

**Myth: Predators will eat all your fish.** Predators are out there, but there are things you can do to protect your fish.

Koi lovers beware, in shallow water garden ponds your "gazillion" dollar prize specimens are at risk, mainly from blue herons or muskrats. But, whether you have pedigree koi or the inexpensive lovable "mutts" that most pond lovers prize, you can fight back. An inexpensive motion-activated water spraying system will deter herons with a timely jet of water. Muskrats are not as common in backyard ponds, as they prefer to hunt in large bodies of water. Raccoons don't care to swim for their supper, preferring to dip into the buffet from the banks. A pond that's at least 8-feet wide will deprive these varmints of dry access to the deepest part of the water garden.

**Myth: Any contractor or landscaper can build a water garden.** Building a pond and building it right are two different things. Building ecosystem ponds is a relatively new specialty. Even a good landscaper isn't necessarily knowledgeable in the concept, design or construction that makes an organic water garden system work. Also, much of the literature and information still in circulation does not relate to ecosystem water gardening. Make sure that the installer is a trained, certified installer of ecosystem ponds. 🌿

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## A Fact: The Law

Products used to maintain ponds and water features are increasingly being sold and marketed without complying with the laws and regulations instituted by the U.S. EPA and mandated by the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). Under FIFRA, pesticide registrants are responsible for providing all test data necessary to satisfy the EPA's registration requirements. All pesticides must be registered (licensed) by the EPA before they may be sold or distributed in commerce.

Products that intentionally circumvent these regulations through loopholes pose potential liabilities to distributors, retailers and ultimately, consumers. These unregistered products have not been subjected to the EPA's strict scientific review. The unregistered products are completely unregulated and may contain elements that may not pass EPA review.

A substantial investment is made in installing backyard ponds, often times approaching \$3,000-5,000. We, as an industry, need to offer the consumer products that have undergone the rigorous testing required by the EPA to ensure that the label gives clear directions for use and does not contain harmful ingredients. Products that have received approval offer the consumer assurances that when the label or product advertising says "product will control and kill algae on contact," these claims have been found to be true by the EPA.

— Rob Larose,  
president and owner of BioSafe Systems

## Fountain kit

This water spout and pump kit can be placed on the side of a pot and plugged in for a beautiful water feature. The fountain can be dressed up using rocks, plants and other accessories. Available in many sizes to fit any container. Bamboo Accents. (415) 454-6260. **Write in 1431**



## Fish merchandiser

This efficient and versatile fish retailing system can house large quantities of fish and can be easily disassembled if needed. It comes complete with a biological filtration system, UV light, pump and all of the plumbing accessories needed for assembly. Aquatic Gardens & Koi Co., Inc. (800) 822-5459. **Write in 1432**

## Floating rocks

These Floating Rocks are available in three sizes and two colors. Discount Pond Supplies, Inc. (800) 979-0999. **Write in 1427**



## Monitoring kits

Pond Check and Lake Check water-quality monitoring kits are a tool for pond and lake management. The effectiveness of bacteria and chemical treatments are greatly affected by things like high pH, low dissolved oxygen and the hardness of the water. Test kits come with easy-to-read instructions and everything needed to take samples. Customers collect water samples and ship them to the test facility. They will receive a written report in about one week. EasyPro/Stoney Creek. (800) 448-3873. **Write in 1436**



## Pump

The HydroDynamax line of high-performance, professional-grade, submersible pumps is made of stainless steel for the motor housing and heavy duty cast iron for the end casings. Metal allows heat to dissipate more evenly than plastic, which keeps the motor running cooler and increases its lifespan. Five pumps make up the line, ranging from the HD 2800 (shown), which circulates 2,880 gallons of water per hour, to the HD 12000, which moves 12,000 gph. Russell Watergardens. (800) 844-9314. **Write in 1443** ▶

