

This is the perfect time of year to explore water gardening. Jan Bahr from Roadhouse Nursery on Central Valley Road between Poulsbo and Silverdale is our local guru. She constructed her first water garden as a teenager and has been learning about water loving plants ever since. In fact her hobby grew into her business. If you've never visited Roadhouse Nursery now's the time to stop by. You'll see water gardens ranging from ceramic pots, whiskey barrel and bathtub sizes, up to a huge viewing pond filled with water lilies. The nursery also features annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs to complete the rest of your landscaping needs.

Simple water gardens don't require pumps or filters. To keep your pond or water feature in balance you'll need plants, fish, water and sunlight. The most basic plant you'll have in your water garden is algae which is free. Algae includes the brown slime lining the sides of ponds and barrels. According to Jan, many of us make the mistake of emptying our ponds and barrels and scrubbing away this algae. Brown algae is part of the food chain of our pond's ecology. Bacteria breaks down fish waste and controls too much algae growth. When we interfere with the process the balance is disturbed and we'll have problems.

The second algae we'll see is filamentous, long and stringy like green hair. Sometimes it even becomes a thick scum with bubbles from all the oxygen it's making. We will want to remove some of this algae but, "Don't be too fanatical about it," Jan says. This stringy algae is actually helping keep our ponds clear.

The third algae is free-floating and makes our water cloudy. This occurs every spring or summer and usually goes away. We don't need to do anything about it. In Japan the KOI experts put their KOI in these green ponds and the fish grow bigger and the colors intensify. This algae is controlled by the use of plants said Jan.

The other life form you'll find in your water gardens is mosquitoes. "Mosquito Dunk" is a form of BT made in tablet form that you can float in your pond to control mosquitoes. In smaller water gardens your fish will do the job for you. Jan says, "You're creating a public service by having a pond. You're making a mosquito trap." The mosquitoes will grow in your pond, but the fish will gobble them up. Ponds often serve as homes for dragonflies and frogs too.

One of the plants nearly every water gardener wants is water lilies. Water lilies like still water. Tropicals need 70-degree temperatures to thrive and won't last the winter here unless we take them inside. They're also more expensive than hardy water lilies. Most northwest gardeners consider them an annual (sometimes a very expensive one). Both varieties of water lilies come in a wide range of colors and sizes. You'll even find tiny water lilies with one to two inch blossoms suitable for very small water gardens.

Most water gardens should receive as much sunlight as possible. You can have edges of your water garden in the shade. Small water gardens in pots and barrels can stay strictly in the shade. You'll find many shade tolerant water plants to choose from. Water clover and water hawthorn love shade. Never ever plant water clover in earth bottomed ponds. It's strictly to use in containerized plantings. Water clover runs and is related to ferns reproducing by spores. Water hawthorn is a bulb. Its leaves will last until ice forms on the pond.

When choosing plants notice how the plant behaves in the pot at the nursery. If the roots are escaping from the holes in the pot and the foliage is spreading all over the pot and spilling over the edges you'll want to think a hundred times before introducing the plant to your earth lined or natural pond. If your nursery person can't give you advice then call Jan Bahr at 360-779-9589.

Other plants you'll want to explore for water gardening are: Zebra Rush; umbrella palm (also called papyrus; a tropical here, dies in winter); umbrella grass ("well-mannered" native draw water bamboo); water plantain (also

called water babies' breath); arrow head (mallards love it; also called Wapato/duck potato); Sagittaria latifolia (make sure you get the one that isn't a noxious weed); marsh marigold; pickerel rush; and lizard's tail. Try your luck with a water garden. Start with a ceramic pot or other fish-safe container. Mine is a plastic whiskey barrel from Home Depot. Maybe in a few years you'll have meandering streams and several ponds.

You can email comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.