



Johnson's Garden Talk

Newsletter archives ... for the friends and customers of Johnson's Garden Centers

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Thinking “Outside the Pond”

Sallie Strole, *Johnson's East Store*

The statistics are startling. Wichita has the highest per capita pond ownership in the nation! Maybe that's a slight exaggeration, but sales of aquatic plants definitely back it up. Before the water is near warm enough, we get numerous calls wanting to know when the water plants will be in. Growing interest in ponds is a given anymore and with that interest comes awareness of the role plants play in balancing a pond's ecosystem. But do all those water plant customers really have water gardens? The answer is “yes” if you expand your definition and think “outside the pond.”

In a conventional pond, submerged plants, or oxygenators, compete with algae for nutrients; while floating ones shade out the algae. Indoors, where a “pond” might be an aquarium, the same plants can be used in slightly different ways. Oxygenators, like anacharis, provide a natural habitat for fish, while floaters such as duckweed and water lettuce are delectable treats for fish and turtles.

Also inside, and all the rage, are beta vases; small fish bowls with narrow openings to accommodate a plant while letting the roots dangle into the water. Typical plants to use for this purpose include peace lilies, pothos, and anthuriums; all are houseplants suited to grow outdoors in summer in shady shallow water areas of ponds as well. Other tropical aquatic plants which can be easily raised as houseplants as long as they are kept moist include arrowhead, calla lily and papyrus, or umbrella plant.

Marginal plants are usually planted at the edge of a pond or on shallow shelves around the rim. These can be either hardy, meaning they will withstand our winter, or tropical meaning they won't. Marginals are used to landscape the pond. Aesthetically they add height, texture and color. Practically, they help shade the pond and provide shelter for fish. In the terrestrial landscape, these water-loving varieties may provide a solution for a problem area that stays too wet for most conventional nursery plants. There are spreading ground covers like houttuynia (chameleon) and creeping jenny which are at home in a stream bed or a soggy corner. Then there are more upright perennials adaptable to land or water such as acorus/sedge, hardy ferns, ligularia, perennial lobelia, iris and horsetail.

Even the royalty of water plants—water lilies and lotus—can be grown outside of the traditional pond. Troughs, bowls, pots without drain holes all can be easily transformed into miniature water gardens. Depending on the size of the container and the variety of lily or lotus, these noble aquatics can be incorporated into your patio pond by just adding water. Also, there is never the question of over or under watering.

Ponds themselves can range from lakes to puddles, but all need plants to make them complete. Plants with floating foliage shade the pond to reduce sunlight to algae. Submerged plants deprive the algae of food, keeping the water clear, while furnishing refuge for fish, snail and frogs. The marginals also rob algae of nutrients, provide habitat for wildlife, and add pizzazz to the pond. But anymore you don't need a stereotypical hole in the ground to enjoy the beauty and benefits of aquatic plants.