

JUST ADD WATER

How to Make a Container Water Garden

By Tony Weits-Van Bloem Gardens



One of the newest and hottest trends in gardening today is container water gardening. You may ask, "Why water garden in containers?"

- It's so incredibly easy to do.
- Everyone has a patio or deck.
- It's very low maintenance.
- You can do it on a low budget.
- You only need a little space.
- It's very safe.
- Use your imagination; any container that holds water can be used.
- You can personalize it with any pot, in any color, shape or design to match your taste and desires.
- If you've always wanted to try water gardening, this is an easy way to get started!

Let's drown a few myths first before we get started...

MYTH #1- *"Yuk, the water will be green and slimy in no time!"*

FACT: Flat Out No! The plant life in the bowl will eliminate the opportunity for algae to thrive and the roots of the plants will keep the water crystal clear all summer long!

MYTH #2- *"No Way! Mosquitoes love to breed in water that's standing still."*

FACT: Not a problem... simply add some goldfish to your bowl. Your new friends will eat any larvae and insects that come in contact with the water. Or, if you don't want fish, you can use a safe and natural insecticide called a "Mosquito Dunk" which will do the trick.

MYTH #3- *"I've never done water gardening. It seems so difficult!"*

FACT: Nothing could be easier! Simply drop in the plant baskets, add water and fish; you're good to go... Oh, yes, you may need to add some water once in a while and fertilize that water lily for more blooms; but that's all there's to it. You can even take a 2 week vacation and your plants will be doing great!

OK, Are you ready to try it? What do you need to create a container water garden?

1. **A Ceramic Bowl-** Ideally one that is water proof or glazed. Other non-porous containers can also be used, like a large plastic pot, a whiskey barrel or even an old wash tub. Minimum depth should be 12 inches. Any diameter can be used, but 24"-36" is best; a pot 36"-48" diameter is fantastic! Plug the holes with a rubber stopper or use a waterproof silicone gel.
2. **A Basket of Water Plants-** Choose only a few plants-simplicity is the key; clear simple lines; emphasize shape, texture and foliage color. Choose a focal plant which we'll call a "thriller" plant. This is the plant that will be taller than any other and has dramatic appeal. The foliage or flower is unusual and its shape may be unique. A thriller plant is often a tropical plant because they're not often found in our gardens.

The next plant you choose we'll call a "filler" plant; its up-right but shorter than the focal "thriller" plant. This is the tried and true water plant that will perform well all season long. This plant is often a hardy variety that can be used for many years to come. The final plant will be a low growing; spreading variety we'll call a "spiller" plant because it can be trained to spill over the edges of the pot. This adds another dimension to your container water garden.



Plant your "thriller", "filler" and "spiller" water plants in an aquatic basket using any all purpose soil that is of medium weight or heavier. (Do not use a light-weight soil that may end up floating in your bowl.) You may wish to add a top-dressing of pea-gravel for decorative purposes; but it is not necessary for holding the soil in the basket since this basket will be held up near the top of the bowl. Use an 18"-20" kidney shaped basket for larger bowls and an 8" square basket for use with smaller bowls.

There are metal brackets available to help you hang your aquatic basket on the side of the bowl.



3. **An Oxygenator**-It would be best to use a potted and rooted oxygenator plant in an aquatic pot; rather than a bare-root, floating variety. This plant will help in adding oxygen back into the water for the benefit of the fish you may add. Place this potted plant on the bottom of the bowl. It will grow up through the water and float on the water surface. You may wish to trim the foliage if they grow too much. The 2 best selling varieties are the Mare's Tail (*Hippuris vulgaris*) and the Red-Stemmed Parrot's Feather (*Myriophyllum brasiliensis*).
4. **A Waterlily**- This will be your focal flowering plant for your container. Your waterlily should be rooted and potted in an aquatic basket and placed on the bottom of the container. Choose an interesting waterlily; use color of bloom, variegated foliage, or tropical as your criteria. You will need to feed your water lily at least 1-2 times per month with a fertilizer tablet pressed into the soil below the soil surface. Remove dead any leaves or buds regularly during the summer. Remember you will need to cover 2/3 of the water surface with foliage in your container water garden to keep it a happy place for the fish.
5. **JUST ADD WATER**- Fill your container with regular tap water. Your plants will prefer a warmer water temperature of 60F or higher to start growing and blooming; but with enough sunshine your bowl's water will be that temperature within a day or two.
6. **Add some FLOATERS**- These are the plants that float on the water's surface and feed off the nutrients in the water. They will eliminate any algae from your bowl. Add 2-3 plants per foot of bowl diameter. Let them thrive until they assume too much space. If you have too many; use them in your bird bath to keep it clean all summer, or give them away to a neighbor or simply toss out. When they're dark green, they're happy. If they're light green or yellow, they may be starving; remove a few from your bowl.
7. **Fish**- Adding Fish is optional... however, they do add a lot of interest for your container water garden as far as your children and the neighbor's cat are concerned. Add 2-3 good size fish (3"-5") per foot of pot diameter (cheap feeder goldfish are OK too). Oxygenator plants provide the needed air for the fish; but the fish will survive without them. No feeding of your fish is necessary; they'll feed off the plants and insects in the water.

What Should I Do During the Season?

- Remove dead foliage and dead buds from your water lily
- Remove any over-growth from any plant; keep it visually appealing to you
- No need to clean the water. It's a self-contained ecosystem.
- Fertilize the water lily often to keep the flowers coming all summer! Fertilize the other plants only if needed.
- Set-up your container water garden in a sunny spot; you will need at least 4 or more hours of sunshine to achieve the best results.
- Add water when needed. That's all!!

What Should I Do For Winter Storage?

- Drain the water out of the bowl; tip the bowl over or cover it with a plywood sheet; better yet; bring the bowl into the garage for storage.
- Bring the fish indoors for the winter or if you have a regular pond, let them winter over in there.
- Toss your plants... OR Plant the hardy varieties in the yard for the winter OR winter them over in your pond. You may try and save your tropical plants indoors as houseplants or in the basement as root stock like your cannas roots.
- Bring your waterlily indoors; you can keep it in a pail or bucket of water in the basement. A hardy waterlily will not survive the winter if the crown of the plant is allowed to freeze. If you have a pond it can winter over in the water as long as it is kept below the ice line which is usually below 18". A tropical waterlily will always need to be brought indoors if it is to survive.



REMEMBER, Water Gardening can be done in any container that holds water. How you do it is left up to your own creativity and imagination. Try it and you'll be amazed at the results!!

CONTAINER WATER GARDENING RECIPE

A SUMMARY OF WHAT YOU'LL NEED FOR A HEALTHY CONTAINER WATER GARDEN:

- **1 WATER LILY**-for a dramatic focal plant
- **2-3 MARGINALS**-for added color and texture
- **1-2 OXYGENATORS**-for the fish
- **1-2 FLOATERS**-to prevent algae
- **2-3 FISH**-for insect control
- **CERAMIC BOWL**-preferably 24" diameter or larger