

## Patio Water Gardens

*Leigh Coxwell is an employee of Tallahassee Nursery. For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>*

July 10, 2005

**C**ontainer gardening is becoming increasingly popular, both as a focal point in a garden setting and as a way to maximize impact in a smaller space. Subsequently, it is not surprising to see this concept spill over into water gardening. All you need to get started is a watertight pot or tub, add water, a few plants and you can create a dramatic container with minimal effort.

When selecting the container for your aquatic garden, be sure that is watertight. Even if your favorite container has a drain hole in it, you can use a cork or rubber stopper to seal the hole. Colorful glazed pots and the traditional whiskey barrel are ideal choices for your garden. The glaze on containers acts as a sealant to prevent water loss. Unglazed terra cotta is porous and water will be absorbed into the walls of the pot. If you decide to use a whiskey barrel use a liner inside the half-barrels. Toxins seeping out of the wood will foul the water affecting the plants' vigor. There are many other things that can be used as interesting containers. Try an old washtub or bathtub for a little whimsy.

As with soil-based containers, you must consider the environment in which the garden will be placed. The majority of aquatic plants need at least six hours of sun a day, so you need to place the garden in a sunny spot. There are a few shade tolerant plants, but they do not have the same impact or interest as sun-loving plants.

Size, texture and color are key to an attractive container. A trio of a tall plant, a mid-sized plant, and one that covers a portion of the water surface will always create a balanced garden. Umbrella palms, royal pickerel weed and aquatic ginger are perfect for this element. These plants are neat, clean and easily maintained. Aquatic mint, Black Magic taro, Aztec arrowhead are three good choices for containers as well. The mint adds the surprising element of a pleasing aroma, the Black Magic taro adds a deep rich purple, and the Aztec arrowhead has beautiful white and burgundy flowers that bloom throughout the summer. Surface plants are not only attractive they help to maintain the water's clarity by filtering out sunlight. Venezuelan poppies have soft yellow cup shaped blooms that are held above the surface of the water. The water snowflake is a lily-like plant that has mottled heart shaped leaves and delicate white flowers. Water lilies are a favorite among most water garden enthusiasts. There is a myriad of shapes and colors to choose from, however miniature varieties work best in containers. Most standard water lily varieties are too large for containers and can quickly outgrow a container.

Maintenance of container water gardens is not difficult. The size allows for easy cleaning and having the plants elevated makes them more accessible than an in-ground pond. Aquatic plants, like their terrestrial counterparts, will require some pruning during the growing season. Spent blooms and old foliage will need to be removed to maintain the health of the plants. Algae is usually not a problem in containers. Plants filter the nutrients out of the water keeping the container clean and clear, although, it might be necessary to use a pond clarifier periodically through the summer. The clarifier helps breakdown organic matter in the water so that the water does not become cloudy. Submerged oxygenators such as fanwort and elodea will also help keep the water

## Patio

crystal clear. One important thing to remember, especially during the summer, is mosquito control. Still water is ideal for mosquito larva to development and needs to be treated to inhibit their growth. The best thing to use is some form of the bacteria bacillus thuringiensis. It comes in both a liquid and a solid. The treated water is completely safe for animal consumption.

For more great ideas for container water gardening, stop by your local garden center and talk to a professional. Relax this summer by enjoying the cooling effects of water and the beauty of aquatic plants on your patio.

###