Native Pond Plants

Photos: Native water lily by Joseph Lyons Walthall. Loblolly sink pond at Native Nurseries, by Donna Legare.

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The importance of using native, non-invasive aquatic plants in a backyard pond or water feature cannot be stressed enough. Wakulla Spring is being over-taken by the invasive plant, hydrilla. This plant was introduced to our country through the tropical fish trade and turned loose in canals and fresh water bodies by unknowing homeowners, just like you and me, who didn’t know better. Now we do.

Water hyacinth is another exotic that has wreaked havoc on our native ecosystems. These non-native aquatic plants displace native species that birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish depend on to survive and make our unique habitat what it is. Using native plants in the backyard pond helps our wildlife and gives us can give us a close-up view of them.

It’s important to have a variety of plants which work together to create a healthy pond. Include edge plants which grow along the banks of the pond. They can be submerged or placed in mucky waters. Also include underwater aquatic plants which help to oxygenate the water. And, finally, include surface plants with foliage that floats on top of the water. They help keep the water shaded and keep algae growth to a minimum.

Some of the easiest natives are those which you see on the edges of local rivers or growing in just several feet of water along the edges. Pickerel weed, *Pontederia cordata*, has pretty purple/blue blooms that start in May and continue sporadically until late fall. It is a vigorous grower to about two feet.

Duck potato, *Sagittaria lancifolia*, actually is a food source for ducks! Small white blooms on This erect native, with lance shaped leaves, grows to three feet tall and has small white blooms.
Soft rush, *Juncus effuses*, forms graceful clumps at the waters edge. This bullrush has round foliage up to three feet tall. The small blooms appear midway up the stems.

Lemon bacopa, *Bacopa caroliniana*, is a mat-forming, shallow water aquatic. It creeps along banks and into the water’s edge. It has fragrant foliage and small blue flowers. It is a good cover for frogs.

Submerged plants that help keep the pond in balance, providing oxygen and absorbing minerals to keep algae growth at a minimum. Hornwort, *Ceratophullum demersum*, is a free-floating oxygenator, growing in feathery clumps. Eelgrass or tapegrass, *Vallisineria spp.*, is a lovely, flowing underwater grass, excellent for fish to hide in. It does well in flowing or still water, growing to whatever depth the pond is.

If you have enough sun, water lilies will bloom all summer. They will grow in light shade, as will all the other plants mentioned. But they will flower better in full sun. Water lilies can be submerged to a depth of two to three feet. They need still water to get established. Repot them each year and fertilize monthly during the summer months. White water lily, *Nymphaea adorata*, is a large grower which can reach four feet wide if given the space. Yellow water lily, *Nymphaea mexicana*, has smaller leaves. It is a vigorous aquatic, needing to be divided annually.

Other wetland plants, well adapted to the residential aquatic landscape include blue flag iris (*Iris virginicus*), red cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), powderblue snakeroot (*Eryngium aquaticum*) and yellow canna lily (*Canna Americana*). The importance of protecting our native habitats is crucial to the survival of our wildlife and for our own enjoyment of the place we live and love.

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