

WILDLIFE PONDS **harrogate aquatic** AQUARIUM & POND SPECIALISTS

Encouraging wildlife to our gardens is a hot topic at the moment, and rightly so! Even adding a little water feature to your outside space will attract all sorts of visitors.

HOW BIG? The larger the body of water, the more wildlife you will attract and sustain, but even something the size of a sink is enough to give birds somewhere to drink and bathe. A bigger volume of water is easier to keep clean and provides a more stable environment: small containers can quickly get warm with very low oxygen levels in summer and will freeze solid in winter, and it isn't fair on the wildlife to encourage them to rely on a habitat that is dangerous in certain weather conditions. Ensuring that at least a third of the pond is a minimum of 60cm deep is a good benchmark.

CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS You can literally use anything that can safely hold water! Avoid anything that has been previously used for chemical storage which may be harmful to the environment (e.g. some plastic storage drums). You can use an old washing up bowl, bucket, sink or bath. Any container can be waterproofed by lining it with pond liner (we have all sorts of small off-cut bargains!) or just dig out a hole in the ground and line it with pond underlay and liner. There are also several different preformed plastic pond designs available if you want to keep it simple and buy something purpose-made.

LOCATION It's worth planning where in your garden would be best to site your wildlife pond. Consider where the sunny and shady areas are in your garden: the best place for a pond is somewhere that only gets sun for part of the day. Too much sun will give you a pond that is full of algae, and not enough sun can limit your choices of pond plant. Try not to site it close to your house as many garden visitors are wary of humans and will be reluctant to venture too close to the house, at least in the early days. Placing it too close to larger trees and shrubs can be a problem in autumn when leaves drop or blow into the water, and roots growing under the pond can cause distortion/subsidence and leaks.

DESIGN Usually a wildlife pond looks best if it is an irregular informal shape with any decorative features arranged to look random and asymmetrical. Make sure you have sloping sides and/or some way for wildlife to be able to climb in and out of the water safely—we've all heard horror stories of mice or hedgehogs that have drowned in garden ponds. You can easily make a ramp out of a plank of wood wrapped in chicken wire for grip, but for a more natural look, a staircase of stones/cobbles or a characterful log will work just as well. Plan ahead to allow shelves for pond plants—marginal shelves at 15cm will be suitable for most marginal and moisture-loving plants. Making one area very shallow (just a few inches) will encourage birds to come and drink and bath. Large cobbles placed like mini islands in the shallows allow easy access for bees and other insects to drink safely.

DECORATION This is very much personal choice but for a natural look you can decorate the edges of the pond with stones, cobbles or sliced logs. If you have a lawn you can peel back the turf when you build the pond and then flop the turf back to cover the pond edging, allowing the grass to grow down to the water's edge like a river bank. A shingle beach area made with a mix of gravel and larger pebbles can look very effective and is great for insect life as they can safely drink from the shallow water between the pebbles without the risk of drowning.

PLANTS There are so many pond plants to choose from and different ones are available at different times through the growing season. As a general rule, anything that flowers will attract pollinating insects (bees and hoverflies etc.) so the best approach is to try and get a variety of plants that flower in different months so you have a rolling selection of flowering plants from March-September. Plants labelled as 'moisture-loving' or 'bog

plants' or 'Zone 1 plants' would naturally be found in marshy areas or on river/stream banks. They prefer the soil to be consistently damp so would normally be planted in water that comes half way up the pot, e.g. in the shallow beach area (maybe with pebbles piled higher to disguise the unsightly pot). The plants labelled 'marginal' or 'Zone 2' are generally found growing at the water's edge with the roots right in the water, so these are the ones you'd put on your planting shelves. Ideally they want the whole pot in the water but leaves above the surface. The 'deep marginal' or 'Zone 3-4' plants include the oxygenators and lilies. Oxygenators are any plants which grow with their leaves under the water (so the oxygen they give out dissolves into the water rather than being released into the air) and lilies send leaves up from a pot at the bottom of the pond to cover the surface, providing shade and protection for underwater wildlife. Try to choose a range of plants for every area and depth, and some which bridge the gap between different areas so you provide a varied environment—some creatures like dragonflies live underwater in their juvenile nymph phase but need to be able to crawl out of the water and dry their wings in their adult phase, so plants like irises and reeds which poke up through the water surface are essential for them.

ALGAE Algae is a simple version of a plant that will naturally grow in any body of water and in small amounts it is an important part of the eco-system. The two most common forms found in a garden pond are unicellular (tiny particles of suspended algae which make the water appear green) and filamentous algae like blanket weed (long strands or tufts of algae which grow on the plants and sides of the pond). If your algae starts to take over, you can try to combat it naturally by adding more plants. Plants feed on the same nutrients in the water as algae does, so your plants help to compete with and starve the algae. Any plants which grow loose in the water will help as the roots take the nutrients directly out of the water (whereas plants in pots will be getting their nutrients from the compost). Algae growth is stimulated by sunlight, so have floating plants and lilies to provide shade— ideally you should aim to have over half of the surface of the pond covered in plants. This restricts the amount of light entering the water, and makes the pond look more attractive. Use algaecides as a last resort and try not to use them in spring when your wildlife is relying on algae for food and protection. Barley straw is a natural slow-acting algae treatment which can be added in spring to restrict algae growth.

WILDLIFE TO EXPECT Once your wildlife pond is finished, you will start to see visitors almost straight away. Birds will bathe in the shallows and flying insects will come to drink and feed from your flowering plants. It will take longer for frogs, toads and/or newts to move in because they will wait for an ecosystem to establish: they eat larger aquatic insects, who eat smaller aquatic insects, who eat algae and phytoplankton, so you need the smallest parts of the food chain to colonise before the larger critters have a reason to stay. Larger mammals like foxes and hedgehogs will pass through and you will spend many happy hours keeping watch over your regulars!

DON'T RUSH IT! If and when the conditions are right for wildlife to thrive in your garden, creatures will arrive and settle in. You should never interfere and manually move animals or insects from another garden to yours as you can upset their established eco-systems and territories or cause health problems within localised populations. This a particular problem with Ranavirus in frogs: populations in one garden can be carriers of the virus but not show any symptoms, and by moving a bucketful of frogspawn to another garden you can infect and kill a whole frog population that hadn't built up any immunity. It is also unfair to relocate frogspawn into a new pond where there isn't enough algae growth to sustain any tadpoles that hatch. Enjoy nature from a distance, let things happen at their own pace and you will have hours of pleasure from your wildlife pond!



Got questions? Talk to us!



harrogate_aquatic@hotmail.co.uk



@hg8aquatic



07514 506156



01423 869590