

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Create a tranquil focal point for your yard by adding a watergarden to your landscape

How Does Your Watergarden Grow? Watergardens are Bubbling Up at Many Emerald Coast Homes, Adding Elegance and Tranquility to Any Outdoor Design

By Jennifer Walker-Journey

arry and Amy Armstrong bought their Panama City home nearly 30 years ago and immediately began redecorating the entire house to suit their tastes. The renovation was extensive — but to the Armstrongs, something still seemed to be missing.

Amy Armstrong looked out on the grounds of her bayfront home and saw potential. She visualized lush plants, bubbling waterfalls and orange-and-white ornamental fish kicking ripples in the water with their tailfins. Armstrong contacted a landscape architect, who made her vision tangible in two separate watergardens at her home.

“We’re big water people,” she says. “And we just love the outdoors.”

Today, more than two decades later, her dream flourishes with a stunning display of lush plantings and waterfalls pouring into a pond where koi contently swim. Over the years, the Armstrongs added to their outdoor watergarden, incorporating a privacy wall, fireplace, grill and major landscaping.

“You’ve really got to see it to believe it,” says Chad Noles, owner of Noles Scapes, who did some of the latest work at the Armstrongs’ home. “It was a lot of work, but it really is amazing.”

Watergardening 101

Watergardens can enhance any space, says Joe McKenna, owner of Zen Garden Inc. in Panama City. He has built several watergardens for customers through the years and has helped several people build their own. One of the first factors to consider is where to put it, he says.

Placing watergardens close to the house can give them year-round appeal by allowing the garden to be enjoyed not only while outdoors, but also from inside the house through a nearby window.

Shade, which goes hand-in-hand with location, also is an important consideration. Whether from floating plants or neighboring shrubs or trees, shade inhibits the growth of algae and should cover about two-thirds of the pond. However, be mindful of neighboring trees that can drop leaves or other debris in your garden, which may result in the need for more cleaning. And while some shade is desirable, be sure the area you are considering does get some sunlight, especially if you want to fill your garden with versatile plant life, McKenna says.

The next step is to determine how large you want the garden to be. If you are installing an in-ground pond, be sure it is deep enough to accommodate any plants or fish you want to include. Because of the climate in Panama City, ponds here need to be only 2 to 3 feet deep to accommodate fish and/or plants such as waterlilies.

The cost of watergardens varies greatly, depending on how large or elaborate they are. Smaller fountains with modest plantings can cost less than \$100 and can easily be done without the help of a professional, while more substantial features can cost several thousand dollars.

Plant with Care

Once a plan for the watergarden is in place, the plants are the next important factor. While serious koi aficionados tend not to put vegetation around their ponds, Henry says, plants add color and shading that soften the appearance of the water feature and make it more inviting.

“When it comes to plants, almost anything goes,” McKenna says. “I haven’t put anything around a pond that hasn’t done well and grown up.”

There are different types of aquatic plants that work well in watergardens. Submerged plants, such as waterlilies, live with just leaves or flowers breaking the water’s surface. These plants also can help to oxygenate the water. Marginal plants, such as cattails, are rooted in the water but grow above the surface.

Floating plants, such as water hyacinth, drift freely on top of the water. These plants provide shade for fish and discourage the growth of algae. They also can spread quickly, so these types of plants are not sold at many nurseries because of their tendency to become invasive, McKenna says.

For plants that grow in soil, placement is important. Taller plantings, such as cypress trees, should be toward the back of the garden, while the front of the garden should be layered with smaller, less intrusive ones, such as dwarf horsetail.

Waterworks

Waterfalls or fountains keep the water circulated, slow the growth of algae and can keep surrounding plants healthier. Without movement in the water, it can become stagnant, inviting mosquitoes. The addition of waterfalls, fountains and fish to a pond requires a pump, which also can add to the cost.

Over time, water can spill, splash and evaporate and will need replenishing. In addition, the growth of algae – especially in this area – can turn the water green and murky, requiring regular cleanings. A dechlorinator can help

keep away the "pea soup," as Henry calls it. He prefers fighting algae with UV lights, while McKenna says generous plantings in and around the water feature helps keep water clear. But even with the aid of chemicals, if you're planning to build a watergarden, expect to do some regular upkeep.

If you want the look of a watergarden without the hard work and hassle of a lot of maintenance, McKenna recommends surrounding small water fountains or birdbaths with potted plants. This relatively low-cost alternative also allows you to bring plants inside when the temperatures drop. Such set ups can be easily relocated.

Ornamental fish, such as goldfish and koi, are hearty and do well here. But adding them to your watergarden requires special attention to both the size and depth of the pond. Fish also may limit the volume of plants you can put in the water. In-ground ponds are best for fish, as many fountains and containers can contain chemicals that may harm them. The addition of fish also requires a filtration system to keep the water clean, which can increase the cost and time you spend on maintenance.

Watergardens naturally attract a variety of wildlife, including birds, squirrels, frogs and butterflies. Fish, on the other hand, can lure a host of other predators, such as raccoons or even the neighbor's cat, which may want to go fishing for dinner in your backyard pond.

There are some creative techniques to outsmart wildlife and save koi, Henry says. For example, heron tend not to land in water more than 3 feet deep, so building your pond to at least that depth can help save your fish. Shaded areas and underwater rock caves give fish someplace to hide. And some watergarden products create ripples in the water to scare off potential predators.