

## GARDENING



**TALL AND SMALL** Left: *Iris pseudacorus* 'Variegata' and *Eriophorum angustifolium*. Below: miniature *Nymphaea* 'Pygmaea Rubra'

# WATER COLOURS

Pond plants increase the range of flowers you can grow in your garden and encourage more wildlife to visit. You don't even need a pond – try planting up a container or a boggy area

Words **Linda Smith**

**M**any gardens, large and small, contain ponds or include streams and boggy areas that are all too often just left to themselves. That's fine, but if you want to encourage more wildlife to your garden, one of the easiest ways is to increase the variety of water-loving plants you grow. The key is to choose plants with different growth habits and flowers: this will increase not just the number but the variety of wildlife visitors.

### WHAT TO PLANT FOR SPRING

The flowering season in the pond starts early in the year with the unusual water hawthorn (*Aponogeton distachyos*). This is the only water plant that flowers in March and April, and very welcome it is too, with its white, vanilla-scented

flowers that rest on the water's surface among 15cm (6in) long green leaves.

When the water hawthorn is flowering, newts, frogs and toads return to the water to mate. Newts, particularly, prefer a still, calm pond and enjoy finding plenty of raft-forming plants with early growth so that they can hide both themselves and their new eggs. Small-leaved plants such as water forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*), brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*) and our native watercress (*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*) are all ideal as they give good cover across the water surface and their leaves are small enough for the female newt to fold with her back legs. She lays her eggs on the leaves, wrapping each leaf in half and sealing it with a secretion to protect the egg as it develops.

As the raft-forming plants continue to grow, they will provide protection for the young newts and other tadpoles: they will also flower as the season continues. Another great advantage for gardeners is that the plants soften the edge of the pond where it meets the hard landscaping or bog edge; they also act as a link between the land and the taller pond plants that stand upright in the water.

### WATER PLANTS FOR EARLY SUMMER

As the season warms, water lilies send up their rounded leaves. The leaves come in all sizes, from 7.5-15cm (3-6in) across, so choose a suitable species for your pond. As a rule of thumb, the leaves should shade 60% of the water surface to keep the temperature cool. Remember the image created by Monet's paintings of water lilies – delightful white, yellow, pink and red flowers dotted on a tranquil surface on a sunny day.

Water lilies like to be planted deep in the pond – typically in mesh planting baskets. They are hungry plants and a successful water lily will use up surplus nutrients in the water. This helps to prevent algae, which thrive in a pond with too high a nutrient level from rotting vegetation or too much open water.



### A SUCCESSION OF COLOURFUL IRISES

Irises are another choice for June and July. If you plan well, you can have a range of different varieties in flower from late May ▷



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**GIVING IT THE EDGE**  
Marginal planting  
helps to blur the  
boundary between  
land and water

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**PONDERING WHAT TO PLANT? Above: Deep purple *Iris sibirica* in the background and native yellow *Iris pseudacorus* in the midground. From top left: water forget-me-nots; water avens; *Anemopsis californica* is not native but is beloved by bees and butterflies**

◁ (*Iris versicolor*) through June (*I. pseudacorus*) into July (Louisiana hybrids). Although each individual flower lasts only a few days, a large clump can give interest for a long period as the flowers open in succession.

Irises are part of the upright emergent plant range – plants that emerge from beneath the water and then grow vertically. The foliage of these plants is used by insects we all want to see visit our ponds in summer – dragonflies and damselflies.

In fact you may already have their larvae in your pond without knowing it, as they live beneath the water surface for a number of years. When it is time for the larvae to emerge as adults and unfurl their wings, they use the upright leaves and stems to climb out of the water. Then for a few weeks you can watch the adult dragonflies and damselflies dip and swoop over the water, looking for a mate, followed by females laying their eggs.

Other tall, upright emergent pond plants that help insects to be able to climb out of the water are reed- and grass-like *Cyperus* and *Eriophorum*, and *Pontederia* species (see *opposite*).



## PLANTING FOR LATE SUMMER

*Cyperus* and *Eriophorum* species add structure, texture and seedheads – particularly useful in a shaded pond – while *Pontederia* species have blue flowers in August, when many other plants have finished flowering. They flower late because they are planted deeper than most other emergent pond plants. They need 15cm (6in) of water above the top of the planting basket to protect the crown of the plant from being trapped in ice in winter.

## BRITISH NATIVES TO ATTRACT BUTTERFLIES AND BEES

Butterflies and bees and other insect pollinators will visit pond plants in search of nectar and pollen. Many, though not all, of their favourite plants are British natives that grow in either the pond itself or in boggy or moist areas nearby.

Our earliest native pollen-producing pond plant is the marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*), which flowers in April. It's followed in May by the yellow water buttercup (*Ranunculus flammula*). Then comes June and the yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), the pink umbels on the flowering rush (*Butomus umbellatus*) and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*).

Building a bog garden by using a piece of pierced pondliner beneath the soil to ensure it retains some moisture is an easy way to increase both the size and the impact of your pond. It enables you to plant a bigger range of water plants, as well as providing shelter for wildlife such as frogs, toads and newts as they visit or leave the pond.

Bog gardens can be planted with all sorts of moisture-loving wild flowers, such as cowslip (*Primula veris*), water avens (*Geum rivale*), ragged robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) and meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), to name but a few.

If you have a small pond, do remember that British natives can be vigorous – the yellow flag iris will soon take over a small space. Sometimes there is a non-native substitute. You could, for example, plant the clump-forming Mediterranean spearmint *Mentha cervina*, rather than our more vigorous *Mentha aquatica*. Carefully chosen non-native flowering species such as *Anemopsis californica*, *Iris sibirica* and *Hesperantha coccinea* can still provide nectar for pollinators but avoid double-flowered varieties, which typically produce little or no nectar and pollen. ◆

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## FIND OUT MORE

**Depth of water is vital to pond plants: too shallow and some may be vulnerable to ice; too deep and not enough sunshine may penetrate to stimulate them into growth. Be sure to read up about each plant's requirements before buying.**

**Linda Smith is a pond plant expert and with her husband Phil runs four times Chelsea Gold Medal-winning Waterside Nursery: visit [watersidenursery.co.uk](http://watersidenursery.co.uk) or call 07931 557082.**



## GARDEN TOO SMALL FOR A POND? TRY A CONTAINER

Even if you have only the tiniest urban back yard or patio, you can still attract wildlife simply by planting up a watertight container

**1 Choose a container without drainage holes in a material that can withstand frost and ice. The 'granite' fibreglass container pictured above is ideal and can be ordered from Waterside Nursery (see above).**

**2 Find a spot in the garden where it can be a focal point – or a hidden delight – and fill with rainwater.**

**3 Plants for sunny positions: miniature water lilies, with leaves 2.5-5cm (1-2in across), irises, *Mentha cervina* and lily-like *Hesperantha coccinea*.**

**4 For shade: foliage plants such as miniature bulrush (*Typha minima*) and umbrella sedge (*Cyperus involucratus*); forget-me-not or *Anemopsis californica* for flowers.**

**5 All container-planting schemes need a portion of submerged oxygenating plant such as starwort (*Callitriche palustris*) or hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) to keep the water fresh and clear.**

**6 Measure the depth of your container and decide how to keep each plant at its correct planting depth (see *Find out more*).**

**Waterside Nursery sells custom-made gridded plant support rings to hold the mesh planting baskets firmly in the right position.**

**7 To keep the water in good condition, use liquid extract of barley straw to control algae, and remove dying plant debris so it does not rot down into the water.**