GARDENING

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

Many 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
Marginal planting helps to blur the boundary between land and water.
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).
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).
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.