One of the most beautiful flowers of summer is arguably to be found not within the swelling canopy of the herbaceous border, nor in a well-placed billowing seasonal pot, but upon the water’s surface. The water lily is the forgotten mistress of the summer garden. Their colour range starts from white to claret red arising from the water’s depths, tight in bud and opening out like exotic cup-shaped peonies.

It must be their essential requirement of having their feet and stems in constant open, still water that makes them often left out of the glossy pages of garden magazine spreads and plant books.

Water lilies go hand in hand with the garden pond. Like wild flower meadows, our native ponds have been on the decline over the last century and they are just as much magnets for a whole array of wildlife.

I craved a pond as a child, somewhere to plunge a fishing net into and hunt for frogs! A weekend treat would be a visit to the aquatics department of the garden centre to peer into the many bath sized tanks of various goldfish and koi carp glistening beneath the water with their dazzling, sweetie foil like scales, looking like the ripest, juiciest halves of peaches and oranges.
Multi-coloured shubunkins it seems are the ones to choose if you have local herons, as they do not look as striking from the air! Water lilies however will shield many fish from the fate of a heron’s spear-like beak however, as their pads cover the water’s surface helping also to curb algae.

Placing terracotta drainage pipes (often the spoil of building sites) at the bottom of the pond will also give sanctuary to fish. Be sensible when stocking fish to a pond – a few goldfish will be of benefit as they will eat mosquito larvae. The pond will only naturally be able to support very small numbers without the addition of hideous-looking filters and pumps.

Our first ever pond was an old round tin bath – the vintage sort once seen hanging up on the garden wall of terrace houses up and down the land; these old baths now command a high price almost everywhere. My mum had rescued this one from an abandoned allotment plot that was due to be built on. At the time my brother was still at the age of being pushchair bound so she recalls having to balance it upon her back like a tortoise shell while pushing my little brother home. A spot in our little garden was dug out for it and, after softening the concave with old carpet, in it went.

It was only about the size of a sitting room coffee table but the amount of life it attracted was immense. Frogs and newts homed in over the summer and by next spring the nightly aquatic chorus boomed though the windows!
There is a water lily for every size of pool. The mighty native Nymphaea alba, which the writer Beatrix Potter is thought to have set in Moss Eccles Tarn Lake near to her Lake District home, has blooms of swan-feather-white – they can still be seen here today. The writer is said to have rowed out onto the lake on her birthday and picked a bunch of water lilies as a personal present!

For more modest sized pools, the ruby-red flowering ‘James Brydon’ is my favourite, but for tiny little container ponds the pygmaea water lilies are the ones to opt for.

Water lilies are fleeting beauties both in the water and vase, where they are rarely seen, but some florists drip wax upon the blooms’ backs to stop them from closing, making them last a little longer than the usual 3-4 days. The flowers are sun worshippers, opening and closing as the sun rays dictate. Spent blooms can be told apart from emerging ones – if you give them a light squeeze they will spit out water!

Ponds, like other garden projects, fruit at best once mature. Water chemistry and the location of the pond is key to success along with being patient.

Oh so often a pond is dug, filled up and stocked with fish only for it to become a lifeless, snotty green puddle within a month. But to have a good, healthy pond is a joy to behold and worth putting the time and effort in to achieve.

Aquatic plants and the correct stocking of them is vital for the water to remain clear and well balanced; this in turn attracts and supports wildlife. Wait several months before thinking about fish (you don’t need them, they just look nice but are best left out if creating a true wildlife pond is the end aim). Focus on planting up the pond with marginals, oxygenators and of course the royal water lilies. Marginals remove excess nutrients via their roots while submerged oxygenators add oxygen! The plants act like a big natural filter – get the right balance and the water will remain clean and clear!
For goodness sake however do leave ducks off the wildlife intro list; they just trash your marginals and lilies. It's an awful shame as ducks are so full of character, but are best given their own little paddling pool which can be refilled with fresh water every day!

If you have allotment why not dig out a pond to encourage lots of slug eating frogs?

Hope everyone is enjoying the fabulous sunny weather of late!

All the best,

Arthur

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