

## Children are the Next Generation of Water Garden Hobbyists

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The Pond Crew partnered with Jungle Labs and the North American Water Garden Society's Ponds for Kids program to create this educational pond at the Cibolo Nature Center near San Antonio, with the help of a group of children ages 4 to 16.

Children are the next generation of hobbyists, and they comprise a large chunk of future business for retailers and contractors. Capturing this market segment is critical to ensuring strong sales for decades to come.

Retailers can host field trips to their store to help lure potential hobbyists into water gardening. Contractors can reach out by sponsoring pond-building events that engage young people.

Informal family outings are also an excellent way to increase interest.

"Parents are always saying, 'Don't touch this or don't touch that,' when they are shopping with their children," says Eric Triplett, owner of Exotic Aquatics in Redlands, Calif.

Triplett sees this as an opportune time to create a win-win situation. When Triplett walks the sales floor, he'll often take the kid customers out of their parents' hair and take them on a kid-friendly tour of the shop. He'll show them crabs and large display tanks and allow them to feed the fish.

"Interaction gets the kids interested in aquatic life and the hobby," Triplett says. "It also helps the parents to shop longer and spend more money."

Properly educated and supervised, children develop a fascination with water that can lead to a lifelong hobby and respect for nature.

Fish and fountains are top attention grabbers, says Jeff Korhan, owner of Treemendous Landscaping Company in Plainfield, Ill.

"Try to engage their senses as much as possible with things that are tactile and have movement," he says.

Korhan recommends simulating nature scenes inside your shop.

"Simulate a beach with sand and have a place to sit down, like benches or rocks," Korhan says.

### Reaching Out

On a hot, August day in Boerne, Texas, a group of shovel-wielding kids and adults found themselves up to their elbows in dirt, but not a complaint could be heard.

The reason for the enthusiasm was pond building. These volunteers, consisting of adults from the pond industry and a group of children aged 6 to 16, felt proud to be a part of the pond-building project at Cibolo Nature Center, just outside of San Antonio, even if it meant getting a little soiled.

Once hooked, youngsters may prefer snorkeling in the pond, rather than a nearby swimming pool.

"Every kid loves to get dirty—that is the fun part for them," says Karen Adams, the public relations consultant for Jungle Labs, a Cibolo, Texas-based company and a corporate sponsor for the construction.

In addition to digging around in the dirt, a local pond professional taught the children about water biology. They learned how water is treated, why it is treated, and how to prepare it for the addition of fish.

The 1,000-gallon pond, like many others constructed by the Ponds for Kids program, was built to help promote the hobby of water gardening. The North American Water Garden Society, a non-profit organization founded by Aquascape Designs,

facilitates the program.

“Fishkeeping and water gardening are really hands-on educational tools for kids and they learn so much about them from this one vehicle,” Adams says of the pond-building initiative.

Triplett volunteered his time to build nine ponds in his area throughout 2005. He plans to increase to one a month in the future.

“The Ponds for Kids Program is the best tool out there, not only to grow the industry, but also to raise the next generation of hobbyists,” Triplett says. “It’s really building momentum and catching on.”

The water gardening industry, in general, is surging, along with children’s interest in the hobby.

Triplett says he recognizes the excitement in the eyes of youngsters when he works side by side with them on a building project.

“You can see the intensity in their faces,” he says.

Dave Jones, chairman of the board for the International Professional Pond Contractors Association, saw that intense look on his son Michael’s face as a youngster. Michael often strapped on his snorkeling gear to peer at his backyard ecosystem through a mask.

“After snorkeling with the fish in the pond, my son wasn’t happy about snorkeling in the pool anymore because he thought it was boring,” says Jones, who also owns The Pond Professional and works as a contractor in Woodstock, Ga. “It was cool for him to watch a frog under the water and see the fish face to face.”

Even the smallest member of the family can help out during construction, picking up loose stones and debris, which provides a sense of pride and ownership. Kid-Friendly Projects  
While children won’t be cleaning out filters or shopping for high-tech pumps, they can be involved in many other areas of pond building and maintenance.

Encourage customers to take their children or grandchildren with them to select some of the fish for the pond.

“It gives them a little bit of ownership,” Triplett says. “And there’s just something about looking into a fish’s eye and seeing the child and the fish interact that touches everybody.”

Feeding the fish is always fun for children, and with proper adult supervision this activity carries very little risk, Korhan says.

Involving children in the construction and maintenance of the pond is critical to getting them to buy into the hobby.

“I’ll have five kids digging, five compacting soil, and five drawing a diagram of how the pond is being laid out,” Triplett says.

Building a pond as a community or as a family develops unity. Triplett says sometimes the volunteers form a line and pass stone down the line like firemen. He says it gives them a sense of teamwork.

Give children jobs appropriate for their age and skill level. Something as simple as putting fists full of gravel into the pond can help a first-grader to feel connected to the project, Triplett says.

#### An Attractive Nuisance

While there are many obvious educational benefits to children getting involved in the hobby, some customers may worry about the risks.

More than 400 children under age 5 die every year from drowning accidents in backyard pools, and nearly 3,000 children are involved in near-drowning incidents, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

“Pools and ponds are what attorneys call an attractive nuisance,” Korhan says.

Contractors are responsible for educating customers about water safety if they have young children living in or visiting their home.

“Children are attracted towards water, whether it’s in a bucket or it’s moving,” says Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Landcare Network in Marietta, Ga. “Everyone wants to protect children, and contractors can do this by communicating with customers about the hazards.”

Delaney says any amount of water may be fatal if a person falls into the water face first and goes unconscious.

Laws surrounding water features differ by state. Therefore, contractors should research local building codes to be sure they adhere to proper regulations, Jones says.

Most localities base their building codes on regional model codes established by the Building Officials and Code Administration.

“The BOCA code states that a water feature smaller than 250 square feet and 24 inches in depth is deemed as landscaping and thus doesn’t fall under pool restrictions,” Jones says.

Delaney recommends contractors carry plenty of insurance to protect themselves. Additionally, a contractor may want to put the risks and regulations into writing for new clients.

Local codes may force contractors to install protective barriers around the pond. The use of rocks or plants deters little people from walking to the water’s edge, Korhan suggests.

“Or you may want to have a shallow viewing end because they will be less likely to drown in a few inches of water,” he says.

Alarms that sound in the home when the water surface has been broken, a feature popular with swimming pools, provide an additional layer of protection, Korhan says.

“It’s very effective with ponds where you can’t use a protective covering like you could with a pool,” Korhan adds.

Many options are available to keep ponds safe for children, but education and awareness of the risks is the first line of defense.

Scott and Ann Springer are frequent contributors to WGN. Their last article, "Public Primes Market" appeared in the January issue.