

Environmental Awareness and Water Features

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From shrinking polar ice caps to rising mercury levels in tuna, recent environmental news tends to be quite grim. But as the water garden hobby continues to grow, pond contractors can celebrate their positive environmental contributions.

In addition to creating beautiful backyard areas, water gardens help further environmental causes by reducing water use in the landscape, supporting native wildlife and teaching everyday people about water quality.

Better than Lawns

Paul Holdeman, owner of the Pond Gnome, a pond design and construction company in Phoenix, says ponds are controversial in his area.

With population growth and persistent drought problems, many potential customers fear that installing a water feature seems like a misuse of the precious resource.

But Holdeman says lawns are the real problem in the desert. He cites recent bans on using turf for new construction in Scottsdale as an example.

“Most lawns use more water than the average-size pond,” he says. “Many homeowners also use fertilizers and other herbicides, which permeate into the groundwater. Ponds, on the other hand, create a sustainable water source for migratory birds and other wildlife.”

Less lawn also means less to mow, which saves energy, and less water used to keep the lawn looking green and healthy. Less mowing also means decreasing neighborhood noise pollution.

Holdeman, who is an Arizona Master Gardener, suggests xeriscaping, a landscaping method that uses native, drought-tolerant plants, to his clients in addition to water features.

“The challenge with xeriscaping is convincing customers that it can include cool, colorful trees, shrubs and flowers, not just rocks and cactus,” he says.

Water gardens help further environmental causes by reducing water use in the landscape, supporting native wildlife and teaching customers the importance of water quality.

For customers not ready for a complete overhaul of their landscaping, try selling them on the idea of keeping a portion of the yard natural.

“I encourage my clients to consider leaving about a foot or two of unmowed grass along the border of the pond,” says Tim Matson, an aquaculture consultant and author. “This grassy area makes a good habitat for wildlife.”

Environmental Awareness

Holdeman estimates that about 90 percent of his customers have no interest in environmental issues.

“Most are looking for a waterfall,” he says. “They are into the fun side of owning a pond. But after six months, they get curious about the pool of water underneath the waterfall, asking if it can handle fish.”

This interest in the pond—and the life it supports—is the beginning of environmental awareness. Consider many of the lessons ponds can offer. Water quality is a great example.

“In the ponding world the sacred chalice is clear water,” Holdeman says. “Green water signals the pond has a balance problem, so you must analyze the filtration system, maybe bring in some beneficial bacteria and plants, or you may have too many fish in the pond.”

The backyard pond serves as a mini-ecosystem from which the pond owner can understand some environmental issues impacting the natural world.

“People don’t want a pond that’s polluted,” Matson says. “It gets them thinking about water quality in other places too. Ponds give us the chance to observe nature, which tends to enhance people’s appreciation of the earth.”

Creating Wildlife Habitats

Many pond contractors hear from owners who notice an immediate change in their backyard once the pond has been established. From dragonflies to birds to frogs and toads, many creatures come visit the new watering hole in town.

“A pond is like a biological magnet,” says Gene Logsdon, author of “The Pond Lovers.”. “It attracts countless types of wildlife.”

From an environmental standpoint, this water is the urban version of wetland restoration. More than 50 percent of U.S. wetland resources have been lost since the 1700s.

Other losses include waterfowl habitat, fish and shellfish nursery grounds, flood water storage, storm surge protection and water-quality benefits, according to the non-profit group Environmental Concern, dedicated to wetland education, restoration and research.

“It’s no secret that urban development has wreaked havoc on the landscape,” says urban naturalist Mike Houck, who directs the Urban Greenspaces Institute at Portland State University. “Fish and wildlife is just as important to protect in urban areas as in rural areas. It has intrinsic value; the 1.8 million people in Portland love to be near nature.”

But how do ponds play into the equation? As part of that environmental adage: Think global, act local. Maybe one pond can’t save the environment, but it can be part of it.

“It’s cumulative,” Houck says. “If everyone maintains decent wildlife habitat and a water source in the backyard, this is a great example of being stewards of the land. You can protect species at every level from home to region.”

When customers are interested in attracting wildlife, be sure to advise them on what kind of wildlife reside in their area and match the water feature according to the needs of those species. These needs will dictate the design of the feature. Some creatures enjoy fast-moving water, while others prefer a slow trickle.

Saving Fossil Fuels

Pond building is now part of a larger trend of outdoor living. More people are living it up at home and creating outdoor living spaces to entertain and relax complete with outdoor furniture, garden art and backyard kitchens. These stay-at-home entertainers should be applauded for their lighter environmental impact.

“With a pond, you don’t need a second home,” Matson says. “Houses can be close to the water’s [pond’s] edge, almost like a boathouse.”

Ponds can serve as swimming pools, fishing spots and sites for amazing waterfalls. Ponds are an immediate escape from the hustle and bustle of city and suburban living.

Many customers develop an interest in the wildlife that a pond can support, sparking an interest in larger environmental issues. With fewer drives to the weekend cabin, pond owners save on gas money and decrease their impact on the earth by releasing less carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Houck says communities that preserve space for wildlife are also helping to reduce environmental impact.

“Rather than driving to the coast, you can experience nature within a regional system,” he says. “The next level is in your backyard. You can have a good nature experience by just looking out the window.”

Improving Government Relations

In the late 1940s the Soil Conservation Service, now the National Resources Conservation Service, created a federal pond-building program for farms. The program helped fund about half the total cost of each pond construction.

These ponds were federally funded because they helped combat many environmental issues including fire protection and flood prevention by slowing water runoff.

The program helped fund the construction of about 9,000 ponds in Ohio alone, Logsdon says, and a comparable number

were built in other states. He says farm ponds can also help recharge groundwater, help with irrigation or provide water for livestock.

The NRCS now provides about \$10 million a year for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which provides assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air and related natural resources on their land. But the NRCS still provides information on its website about farm ponds.

“A properly located and maintained pond can reduce gully erosion and improve water quality,” according to the site. “Ponds provide water for livestock, waterfowl and fish; store water for emergencies; and add beauty to the landscape.”

(Adapted from an article that ran in the Spring 2006 issue of Ponds Magazine.)