

Manufacturers, Distributors Ponder New Water Gardening Trade Group

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Concerns of potential founding members include pricing issues (particularly Internet/mail order companies selling products at too great a discount), potential regulatory threats, general promotion of the hobby and the need for a single national trade show for the industry.

Summit at the Summit: Participants experience the prairie roof of Aquascape Design's Aqualand headquarters, where Greg Wittstock hosted a dinner, tour and discussion of issues for water gardening equipment suppliers.

The two meetings were held in conjunction with the National Lawn and Garden Show and the International Water Garden and Pond Show, and, for the most part, the attendee list was pretty much the same at both meetings.

Several major players that didn't attend the NLGS, however, were not present at either meeting, including Beckett, Hozelock Cyprio and Laguna Water Gardening.

The first meeting, a second annual "summit" of water gardening manufacturers and distributors, took place at Aqualand, Aquascape Design's new headquarters in St. Charles, Ill., while the second meeting, organized by Michael Richter of Ecological Laboratories, took place at the convention center in Rosemont.

The Rosemont meeting was convened primarily to gauge interest among distributors and manufacturers in forming a trade association, tentatively named the Water Garden Manufacturers and Distributors Association (WGMDA). Roughly 45 people attended the meeting.

The group will meet again at Pondapalooza in Pittsburgh on August 2 to further discuss details of what they expect the group to accomplish.

Possible topics include sponsoring a national water garden industry trade show, addressing regulatory issues or promoting water gardening in general.

The group may also begin selecting individuals, possibly as a board of directors or steering committee, who would establish the association.

Also at stake: What type of relationship would such a group, if formed, have with existing associations, notably the National Association of Pond Professionals and the International Professional Pond Contractors Association.

Aquascape president Greg Wittstock organized the summit and hosted participants to dinner and a tour of Aqualand.

Although acknowledging that they were all competitors, Wittstock said common concerns needed to be addressed in order to grow the overall water garden market.

The first summit was held last year at Pondapalooza in St. Louis, Mo., after a planned summit in May 2005 in Las Vegas in conjunction with the National Hardware Show fell through.

The idea of the summit was to allow distributors and manufacturers to discuss issues of mutual concern, including discounters, government regulations and Chinese imports.

Much of the conversation focused on MAP (minimum advertised price) policies. Most attendees supported the policies in principal, with Savio Engineering, represented by president Valerie Steele and marketing director Bill Lane, widely acknowledged and applauded for their actions in rolling out their policy in April 2005.

Most other companies, including Aquascape, said they were planning or considering implementing MAP policies, often because their retail and wholesale customers were demanding them.

However, many of these companies voiced concerns about the expense and hassle of policing these policies.

Other threats the suppliers cited were the effect of rising oil prices on discretionary income and Koi Herpes Virus.