

Natural Methods Overlooked

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In the article, "The Perfect UV Customer" (June/July 2006) Bob Scherer, owner of Scherer Water Gardens, says, "There are thousands of fish in them [display ponds] and you can see to the bottom of the pond." Later in the article, John Nealy, manager of The Pond Shop, says, "If they don't have a UV system, the water will turn green. Retailers need to make it something that customers need to have. That's what makes all the difference."

My response to these statements is straightforward. I also have several large koi in a 2,800-gallon display pond, and I only rely on the proper application of bacteria and an adequate marginal plant community to keep my water crystal clear 365 days a year, even with consistent feeding. Of course, my biological filters are top notch. I have no UV sterilizer whatsoever and have never, in several years, experienced green water or anything other than gin-clear water.

I find it to be misleading to capitalize on the customer who has inadequate filtration, improper bacterial applications or inadequate plant life in the pond by selling the client an expensive UV clarifier. A UV sterilizer is a costly measure which never allows for a balanced ecosystem, as compared to the long term and less costly solution of adequate filtration, bacteria/gravel and marginal plants installed in the shelf of the pond.

In the article, "Help Customers with the Great Blue Heron" (June/July) much is said about deterrents (some rather unnatural, such as netting and lines) to heron. If an adequate shelf or tunnel is constructed in the pond, the fish will be safe from any predatory waterfowl.

There have been several visits of large heron to our demo-pond—a pond that is home to fish from small fry to 24 inches. Not one fish has been taken due to the ability of the fish to seek cover under natural looking shelves.

Both articles did not address the whole picture, which can lead other retailers, contractors and consumers astray by failing to mention other more effective solutions to both the UV and heron dilemmas.

Greg Leston
Creative Water Gardens
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Aggressive Alligator

I just returned from two days at the IWGS International Symposium in Orlando, Fla. Your editorial comment in the August 2006 issue was exactly what some of us were thinking when returning from the meeting.

My wife and I regularly attend the FNATS (Florida Nursery and Allied Trades) show and the TPIE (Tropical Plant Industry Exhibition), because she is a serious amateur and I am a professional research worker in plant biology.

Comparing the three meetings, I think the IWGS would benefit greatly by meeting with other groups who have a larger representation by exhibitors and allied interests. The program they had was great; however, it could have been the same program with many more opportunities.

I am the "default" editor of Pond Droppings, the newsletter for the Florida West Coast Koi and Water Garden Club and really appreciate getting Water Garden News. The Retailer Profile about the Backyard Getaway Store was exciting. They have been active and enthusiastic in their enterprise.

As editor of the newsletter, I have set out to devise strange and wonderful projects to do after the pond is finished. The last one was a variation on the micro-controlled heron water shooter (News ticker page 7/August 2006).

My variation on the theme is to use an "aggressive alligator" decoy run by a Radio Shack solar fan [pump] and bumper technology to keep it randomly swimming. Every now and then it would attack a heron on the side of the pond. The concept is that herons are evolutionarily programmed not to wait to see if the approaching predator is real or not.

At IWGS, a fellow said he had done a similar project with duck decoys and had them splashing to simulate a landing. It

worked. "Heron Scarem" hasn't been tried yet. I am looking for a high school science project to build it.

Nick Eigsti
Florida West Coast Koi and Water Garden Club

Show Time

I enjoyed your commentary in the August 2006 issue on the four primary national events held for the water gardening industry. A large number of industry professionals would also like to see a singular event that meets the needs of the entire industry rather than just certain segments of it.

You nailed a number of salient points in your editorial regarding the strengths and weaknesses of existing events, such as enthusiasm, location, education and business. However, in order for any event promoter to combine all of these ingredients into a successful, unified event for the majority of the industry, another vital component must be understood and incorporated into the mix.

Water gardeners are an entirely different species. Even though we technically fall under the auspices of the lawn and garden industry, we have little in common with that mainstream group.

A primary reason for this natural exclusivity is that ponds are capable of generating and sustaining a profound spiritual experience with many of those who are fortunate enough to be touched by the incomparable beauty, allure and serenity of a backyard pond. This experience will often give way to a powerful passion and a desire to connect with others who share this intense and all-consuming interest.

To the best of my knowledge, this unique, cohesive blend of spirituality and passion does not exist in any other segment of the green industry. I cannot imagine the turf or irrigation industries possessing anything close to the driving passion and zeal found in water gardeners.

This principle was illustrated at Pondapalooza in St. Louis last year when I met a business owner from Virginia, who came directly from the irrigation industry. He was marveling about the openness and camaraderie found in pond folk as compared to his former industry affiliation. His words to me were, "In the irrigation industry, people won't even talk to you, but here it's all peace, beads and flowers."

This unique bond, which exists among Homo Sapiens Pondfolki, has also given the entire community an intense desire for socializing and networking among themselves and within their specialized niche in the green industry. If you were to get some candid answers from attendees, you might find that, for some, this aspect is the compelling reason for attendance. The educational portions merely provide a "legitimate" reason for attending.

Any event promoter seeking to put together a successful, all-encompassing event needs to understand some of the history of national water gardening events in the United States.

This history would likely start in the late 1980s or so with the advent of "The National Pond Expo" held near Atlanta for several consecutive years by water gardening pioneer, publisher and promoter, Alan Sperling. Alan employed a comprehensive formula, which is still being utilized by industry promoters. He published a monthly pond magazine, organized The National Pond Society and held a national pond event, which consisted of classes by industry professionals, a manufacturer and distributor trade show and a pond tour.

The Pondkeeper Group, IWGS, Aquascape Designs, and others all followed suit and have used variations on this theme in their subsequent events with differing degrees of success. This type of format is well-suited to the needs of the pond community, and is what we've been accustomed to in the past. Anyone seeking to corral the best possible components contained in all these events and roll them into a single, "must-attend event" for the industry should bear this in mind.

You made mention in your editorial of several reasons why an event of this type has not yet been successfully implemented, including "wrong timing, the audience is off or politics exist." The political dimension is probably the most noteworthy and problematic. But the historical antipathy which exists between groups of disparate philosophical underpinnings is starting to show significant signs of abatement with more crossover attendance and multilateral support among the various groups than ever before.

Building further upon your four bullet points, I'd like to weigh in with some additional suggested criteria for the "must-attend water-gardening event."

Enthusiasm: You only mentioned Aquascape in this section, but speaking as someone who “came up” on the traditionalist side of this industry, I can assure you that members of the Aquascape community are no more passionate about ponds than are their orthodox counterparts. The difference lies in the fact that the Aquascape machine has somehow managed to channel and focus this tremendous energy into the most energetic and well-attended event in the entire industry. Unfortunately, no one to date has been able to achieve a comparable degree of success within the industry majority. Why is this?

Location: As long as the location is easily accessed by direct commercial flights, and the host city has adequate facilities, this component seems to be the least mission-critical of them all. If these basic criteria are met, the onus of success or failure then falls directly on the event promoter.

Education: You hit upon a key point when you stated that information presented at the ideal event “should remain objective.” Unfortunately, no industry event that I’ve attended within the past 10 years can claim true objectivity, despite some rather prominent rhetoric to the contrary. The ideal event promoter for a gathering of this type should be completely neutral, allowing all people and points of view to receive a fair hearing before the attendees. In a truly free marketplace, the natural winnowing process eventually manages to separate the chaff from the wheat.

Conventional wisdom has a history of not only impeding progress, but of also ridiculing those who dare to dissent and step outside the mainstream. It wasn’t so long ago during the “Great Pondliner Wars” that all of us who initially started selling EPDM liner (as a result of Maryland Aquatic Nursery’s pioneering efforts) quickly became objects of derision for selling a product that a great many “experts” just knew killed fish upon contact.

These self-styled experts were almost evangelistic in their efforts to stop this scourge from gaining a foothold in the industry. Negative articles appeared in koi and pet magazines, and even some national water gardening companies attacked this threatening product. The naysayers eventually self-imploded or reluctantly converted to EPDM, and now there is an entire generation of pondkeepers who have never even seen a pond constructed from HDPE or PVC.

A strikingly similar, but less emotive situation existed when the first commercial pond skimmer was introduced in the early 1990s, and now there are no less than 17 companies manufacturing them.

Business: As seasoned event attendees are aware, most of the real business at these events is conducted after-hours, on the golf course or at the hotel bar. Networking is arguably the most profitable aspect of these events, and the ideal event will provide ample opportunity for after-hours networking opportunities, as well as bringing large numbers of vendors and attendees together. The NLGS did bring a fresh and novel dimension to the existing equation, but this show is more along the lines of a traditional lawn and garden tradeshow, rather than a specialty water gardening event. Additionally, the targeted audience is traditional lawn and garden distributors rather than water gardeners.

Promotion: No matter how well a pond event is tailored to the needs of the pond community, it is vital that it receive adequate and vigorous promotion. Until an industry event becomes capable of attracting more than 100 or so devotees, this concept of one “mega-event” will never get off the ground. But, “If we build it, they will come.”

The vendors servicing this industry have always stepped up to the plate and have been more than willing to support any promising new enterprise. Virtually all of them would jump at the chance to get behind a venture such as the one you have theorized in your editorial.

The idea of clustering smaller industry group events around a major mega-event certainly has great logistical appeal, but it’s doubtful whether it would prove feasible in the near future. In an industry still growing by leaps and bounds, some of these independent groups have flat-lined or shown negative growth patterns for several years now, leading one to the conclusion that increasing membership or event attendance is simply not a priority. Then what is? Perhaps the idea of complete autonomy, the thrill of a personal fiefdom or maintaining corporate individuality in a rapidly changing and increasingly amorphous industry may be the real *raison d’être*.

Fun: While not always institutionalized in the official schedule of events, there is always a lot of memorable mirth and occasional ribald revelry which occurs at these events—not all of which is sanctioned by event promoters. Any truly successful pond event will make provision for letting off steam and having just plain old good fun.

In summary, I agree with you not only about the desirability of such a mega-event, but also about the timely necessity of one. This industry has never tolerated a vacuum in any area for any length of time, and it’s doubtful whether such an opportunity as this will continue to slip by unnoticed. It will be interesting to see what develops.

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To report an error, clarify a story or correct an address in the directory please contact associate editor, Suzanne Boothby at sboothby@bowtieinc.com.