

Getting the Most From Your Hardy Water Lilies

Provided by Keith Folsom, President, Springdale Water Gardens in Greenville, Virginia

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To flower and flourish, a water lily needs care like any other perennial. Proper sunlight, soil, fertilization, water depth and pruning will determine the success of the plant.

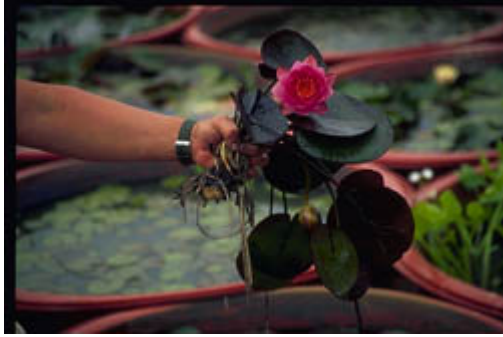
Water lilies begin putting up their first floating leaves in early April. The first ones may be smaller or darker in color than later ones. As the season unfolds, the leaves get larger and begin to shade the water below, cooling and moderating temperature fluctuation. Each leaf lives three to four weeks then turns yellow and dies. Prompt removal of yellowing leaves at the soil level encourages new leaves to appear. In May, the first flowers reach the surface, opening and closing daily for four days each. As a flower is spent, it will slowly sink into the pond and should be pinched out to promote more flowering. Hardy water lilies flower from May until September in USDA Zone 6, with the peak season in June through August.



Position the water lily so that it receives at least five or more hours of direct sunlight. The afternoon sun is best. Some varieties will flower at a reduced rate in less sunlight. More sun means more flowers. A pond in full sun is preferred. Do not worry about the water being too hot for the fish, remember, the water lily is keeping the water cool.

Good quality topsoil is used as the growing medium. Clay-loam soil from a vegetable garden or lawn is commonly used. Do not use a bagged soil unless it is specifically labeled for aquatic plants. Lightweight soil amendments are to be avoided, as they will float. Avoid subsoil or poor quality soil. Cover the soil with a layer of fine gravel to keep the fish out and the soil in.

Use a planting container that is as large as your pond can accommodate. Larger soil volume means bigger flowers and leaves. A pot that is wide instead of deep is preferred. Place the pot at the bottom of the pond up to three feet deep. Allow a minimum of ten inches of water over the soil surface. Note shallower requirements of some smaller varieties require placing the pot no less than eighteen inches deep. Position a plant less than the preferred depth and quantity of flowers will be reduced. Be sure the roots are below the freeze line in winter.



Plant the water lily according to the diagram. The rhizome (root) is positioned so that the cut end is against the side of the pot, not in the middle. This gives the root as much room as possible to spread across the pot.

Regular fertilization will keep your water lily blooming and growing well. Fertilizer tablets are pushed into the soil at planting time and from April through August. Follow the manufacturer's recommendation for fertilizer application rates. Liquid fertilizers for aquatic plants will not produce the same results as tablet form fertilizers.

Locate the water lily so that the floating leaves are out of the turbulence of the waterfall or fountain spray. Water splashing on the top of the leaves will discolor or destroy them.

The normal maintenance of the plant involves removal of spent flowers and off color leaves. They should be removed all the way to the crown to reduce decomposing plant waste in the water garden. Regular fertilization and maintenance of the plant will ensure flower production throughout the season. A full plant means cooler water beneath and a healthier pond for the fish. Healthier water means more enjoyment of the water garden.

This article is submitted by Keith Folsom, president of Springdale Water Gardens (T/A-Springdale Aquatic Nursery and Supply) in Greenville, Virginia. Keith has been involved in water gardening since 1980 in all aspects, from design, installation, propagation, production and consultation. Springdale is a retail/wholesale mailorder production nursery that is open to the public year-round. See their website for free color catalog and directions to their water garden center, springdalewatergardens.com or call 1-800-420-5459.