

Water features

– an eco-system
of your own

*By Susan M. Botich
Photography by Tom Violand*

One of the most relaxing sounds in nature is the soothing music of gently flowing water. Whether a babbling brook, a cascading waterfall, or a mellow trickling spring, these all create a soothing environment that makes us take a breath and say, "Ah, this is peace."

Most of us don't have our own natural bubbling spring or serene pond in our backyard. But that doesn't mean we can't create one. In fact, there are many reasons to build a backyard pond. One is that ponds require less water than lawns of the same size.

Mike Dayton, owner of Liquid Landscapes in Reno, has been designing and building water features for eight years, from small bubbler stones to half-acre ponds with multiple levels, with a focus on eco-friendly pond creation. To him, the most important aspect of a water feature on your property is that it can be entirely eco-friendly.

But what defines an eco-friendly water feature? "One that works with nature and doesn't require harmful chemicals to maintain balance," says Dayton, "a system using a combination of mechanical filtration along with beneficial bacteria and plants to keep water clean and clear."

Going eco in existing ponds

Converting a chemically treated water feature into an eco-friendly water feature may not be as difficult or costly as it sounds.

"We make repairs or modifications (to existing water features) all the time," says Mike Dayton, owner of Liquid Landscapes in Reno. "There are many variations of ponds, especially older ones. A lot of what we do depends on what the client has had done in the past. For the most part, it could simply mean that we have to add a different kind of filter. When chemicals are added to water features, it usually means they use less filtration. Sometimes just changing filtering systems can turn them into eco-friendly systems. Sometimes you have to tear them all out and start over."

Dayton's top suggestion for anyone considering this kind of change is to consult with a professional first. Also, seek out do-it-yourself seminars at landscape and nursery firms. Study the possibilities and read up on alternatives before you plan your water feature conversion.



Though it looks like a natural lake, this pond is simply a large water feature.

Justin Meckley, manager of the water garden division of Rail City Garden Center in Reno, agrees that eco-friendly means following nature's example. "When you build any eco-friendly water feature, you are building an eco-system," he says. "It's a living creation, one that may have plants, beneficial bacteria, and possibly fish."

According to Dayton and Meckley, the chemicals that should not be used in any eco-friendly system are chlorine and bleach. They can be harmful to plants, fish, birds, pets and people. A water feature that uses these chemicals cannot have plants or aquatic life. It also won't have the beneficial bacteria growing in it that an eco-friendly water feature has.

"An eco-friendly water feature doesn't mean you have to have fish in your pond, though," says Meckley. You can also have what we call a 'pondless waterfall system.' That's without plants or fish (or pond) but you don't have to add any chemicals to keep it clean or to stay environmentally balanced." ➔



An eco-friendly water feature can include a pond such as this one.

MAINTAINING YOUR SYSTEM

From the simple to the elaborate water feature, maintenance can be relatively easy. “We don’t use chemicals, but we do add naturally occurring beneficial bacteria that breaks down fish waste and maintains clean, healthy water,” says Dayton.

Eco-friendly ponds allow for natural wildlife, too. “Fish, frogs, algae-eating snails, turtles, salamanders, basically anything you would see in your local natural ponds, you can have,” says Dayton. “It’s a beneficial part of the pond balance.”

For eco-friendly ponds to maintain the proper balance of algae, you must have properly installed skimmers and filters, he says.

Those filters include beneficial bacteria and enzymes to clean the water, adds Meckley. “It starts with the skimmer,” he explains. “Without the skimmer, debris such as fallen leaves would decompose and turn into a big algae mess. The skimmer pumps the water up through a pipe to a biological filter at the top of the water feature. That is where the filter keeps the water clean.” Inside the filter are live, beneficial bacteria and enzymes that eat the excess algae in the water.

“With the addition of water plants and a little bit of maintenance, your pond should be clean and clear,” says Dayton. “A little green algae on the rocks is normal and natural.”

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CLOSET CONCEPTS

Algae wars – a truce

Some people think algae, in itself, are bad.

Not so, says Justin Meckley, manager of the water garden division of Rail City Garden Center in Reno.

“You will always have some algae in an eco-friendly pond,” he says. “A little bit of algae is a good thing. But you want to keep it to a minimum so that it’s not excessive and taking over the pond.”

How? Meckley recommends an eco-friendly algaecide as the best way to kill the string algae. And, if you’ve got a lot of algae, pull it with a rake, a small skimmer net or your hands. Then, treat the pond with the algaecide. Algaecide is the eco-friendly replacement for chlorine, he says. And keeping up on maintenance is the best way to keep algae at proper levels.

Another inexpensive, easy way to keep algae at bay is barley. “Barley pellets or bales will help combat the string algae,” says Meckley. “Barley is a vitamin, a kind of stimulant that helps the natural organisms that eat algae.”

When it comes to algae, “a lot of re-educating is necessary,” says Meckley. “Algae are basically a weed for the pond. Algae are not harmful for fish or any other aquatic life. The fish will have a field day eating it but not enough to get rid of it.”

Meckley strongly urges water feature owners not to use UV sterilizers for killing unwanted algae. “That’s a light that cuts down on algae by killing it,” he says. “We’re able to keep our ponds clean and clear without using the UV stabilizer. They just add extra cost. Our systems are designed without the need for them.”



Algae – natural, but it’s not pretty. And it can take over a pond.



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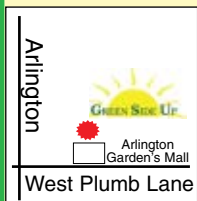


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Water Features

The water features only need about an hour of maintenance every two weeks, something that Dayton says most homeowners can do on their own.

But how? “Clean the filters when they get full of leaves,” he says. “In the springtime, do a major maintenance – drain, wash, clean filters, refill.”

“A few minutes a day is all you need,” he adds. And if you opt for fish in your pond, it isn’t necessary to feed them. They eat bugs and algae.

Susan M. Botich is a Minden-based freelance writer.



Eco-friendly ponds provide a natural home for Koi and other fish.