

The DIY Garden Pond

By Felicity Ericson

It is a strange phenomenon that even those that live by a lake or on a river have a hankering for a garden pond, or an equivalent. I'm one that has an equivalent.

The 'equivalent' happened because I would only buy new stuff when I could not build what I envisioned from my husband's vast collection of old stuff. So, on a pleasant sunny morning 20 odd years ago, I started digging the hole for my goldfish pond. Actually I dug what I suppose was really a shallow well because at about two feet I reached water. At three feet wide and three feet deep I was ready to stop and eased in the pond liner cut from an old 25-man life raft. Black, heavy and thick enough to stay watertight for a good many years, it had to be pushed and rammed rather than eased. To anchor the edges of the liner, I placed five of my precious three inch thick and roughly 3' x 2' slate stepping stones – another job that required a heaving, shoving, struggle to move each into place.

By evening the pond was filled with water. The next day I prepared a large oval flower bed extending from the pond toward the house and readily seen from indoors. This was easy work because the soil is 90% sand. In the center I placed an old graceful trellis that had traveled with the slate slabs from our previous home. At the pond I placed my two strange looking but much loved hypertufa cats. The following day I released 10-cent feeder fish into the pond. Time passed.

The goldfish thrived and grew beautiful gossamer tails, the bedding plants flowered and the weeds and wiregrass flourished. A frog moved in next to the cats and gulped its mournful song. A stray domestic goose presented us with six goslings and taught them to swim in the pond before taking them to the river. Birds and animals drank from the pond and in the fall leaves drifted into the pond but soon disappeared into its depth. One summer I sheltered a pot of papyrus: it grew so large it shattered the pot and next I had a duckweed invasion. But remember, this pond is only three feet wide and duckweed is easy to pull out for composting.

Then came hurricane Isabel and the pond disappeared under two feet of water. When the water receded the fish were gone, but the cats still sat solidly at pond's edge. Many of the plants slowly died but the weeds and wiregrass recovered quickly. The frog has never returned. I replaced the fish with new 28-cent feeders but they failed to thrive so I left the pond to the leaves.

This spring the years of accumulated algae and leaves finally overwhelmed the water and it began to smell rather unpleasant. We accepted that it was time to pump it out and fill up with fresh water. Well, as we pumped out the water we discovered a very much alive crop of killie fish which we scooped up and returned to the river! Perhaps this was why we never had a mosquito problem?

At this writing the pond sits almost empty as I contemplate donning rubber wellies and climbing in to remove the remaining three inches of fluff mud – and have a long think about what to do next. Most likely I will buy a small shallow preformed container and somehow fit it into the space that will remain after I remove the old liner (tug, heave, sweat and groan) and the sides collapse and settle in.

What follows is a discussion of what I did wrong and what I discovered. I think my biggest mistake was putting a south facing bed 50 ft. from our south facing windows. I had correctly evaluated the amount of sunlight but failed to realize that from the house we would only see the backs of the flowers. And, while the shrubs and flowers are all low-growing, watching from the house, they mostly screen whatever visits the pond. The pond is too deep for its width. Fortunately I never tumbled in head first. A mesh screen, particularly during the fall months, would help keep the leaves out. Fish or some sort of water agitation is necessary to control mosquito larva.

Here is a partial list of what survived their saltwater dunking: *Bletilla striata* (ground orchid), *Chrysanthemum Pacifica*, white allium, peonies, plumbago, *Tradescantia virginia* (spiderwort) prostrate rosemary, fennel, clematis, small native sunflowers, *Teucrium* (germander), sedums, various narcissus but especially the sturdy 'Winston Churchill', mints, rugosa roses and all the weeds along with the companion wiregrass.