

How to: Make a pond in a pot



Photos: Helen Bostock

No space is too small to accommodate a pond in a pot. It's an excellent weekend project and a fun way to introduce children to water wildlife. Container ponds can ideally be sunk into the ground but can stand on a hard surface and are very suited to patios and elevated positions such as balconies and roof gardens.

Because the water is at a raised height, they are good for wheelchair users. A little consideration is needed about how wildlife will safely get into and out of the water. Once filled with rainwater and planted up, they are easy to maintain and can provide hours of pleasure.

Target species: Container ponds may be small, but they can be home to quite a number of aquatic species, starting with pond skaters (*Gerris lacustris*) and backswimmers (*Notonecta glauca*), followed by damselflies, frogs and toads. Depending on design and placing they may also be used by birds and mammals such as hedgehogs to have a drink or bathe.

How to do it

- Choose a water-tight container. Recycling an old container is even better than buying new.
- Decide on where it will be sited. Somewhere with sun for at least part of the day is good.
- If sinking the container into the soil, dig out a hole to the correct size and depth so that the lip of the container sits slightly above ground level, preventing soil from falling in.
- Collect items to form shelving, steps or ramps both within your container and on the outside if it isn't sunk into the ground. Bricks, stones, upturned clay plant pots, logs or a plank of wood covered in chicken wire are all suitable. Place these so they touch the outer edge of the container and form an accessible route into and out of the water for frogs and mammals but leave some deeper water areas.
- Fill with rainwater. If you don't have enough harvested rainwater to fill it in one go, do it in several goes when it rains rather than using tap water which can add unwanted nutrients that can cause algae to grow.
- Once your mini-pond is filled buy two to five aquatic plants, depending on the size of your container. It isn't necessary in such a small space to use submerged/oxygenating plants. Choose plants which aren't likely to get too big such as flowering rush, marsh marigold or *miniature* water lilies. Lower your plants

into the water in pots, standing them on a stone or brick where necessary to ensure the correct water depth.



- Create a 'bee-drinker' by placing stones or pebbles on a wide garden saucer or tray and keeping topped with water. Honey bees need water to air-condition their hives.

Photo: Helen Bostock

How easy is it to do?

Easy/moderate

How much will it cost?

Minimise costs by recycling old containers such as plastic buckets or tubs, Belfast sinks or even baths. New half-barrel containers are attractive and cost from about £40, you can pay up to £500 for trendy antique stone troughs. Aquatic plants will cost around £20-50.

How effective is it for the target species?

Effective, provided sited correctly and with provision for wildlife to enter and leave the water safely. If other water bodies such as garden ponds and lakes are nearby this will increase the speed of colonisation and number of species likely to be found.

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- Site in full sun or part shade
- Containers usually have straight sides which limit access to the water for many animals and lead to risk of drowning if amphibians, birds or hedgehogs can't get out. This is why you must provide escape ramps inside and out. This is less of a problem on a balcony where four legged visitors are unlikely to visit, but internal ramps still help bees and birds.
- Very small containers, such as old washing up bowls, will have more limited use being too small for example for amphibians to breed or overwinter in. They will also need topping up more frequently in hot weather. If you are able, create several different container ponds of varying sizes to cater for a wider range of species
- Topping up with rainwater instead of tap water reduces problems with algae including blanketweed
- It is safest to buy plants from a reliable aquatic nursery, gifts of plants from someone else's pond can unwittingly bring in invasive weeds. If you do accept donated plants quarantine them in a bowl until you are sure they are uncontaminated
- Don't add wild animals as they will make its own way, few new habitats attract insects faster than a pond

What to look for?

A mini-pond can be very exciting and you could see insects using it within a day or two. It is possible you will get mosquitoes. Their larvae are small grey maggots which wriggle close to the surface of the water.

They are part of garden wildlife and by creating a wildlife-friendly container pond you will also be encouraging their natural predators such as frogs and dragonfly larvae. You are most likely to see amphibians active after dark, especially on damp evenings. Use a torch to peer into the 'depths' of your container. By choosing pond plants which flower, you can also expect to see pollinating insects visiting the flowers.

Things to be aware of

- Half barrels make attractive container ponds but if they used to hold alcohol this can lead to the water turning smelly and going milky with bacterial growths. It is not clear if this is particularly harmful to wildlife but it is unsightly. Repeated scrubbing and rinsing of the inside before use may help. Or a more permanent solution is to line the inside with a heavy-duty black plastic bin bag or section of pond liner, holding it in place with aquatic sealant.
- In such a small space even plants can quickly grow and start to take over. Delay this by pulling out surplus plant material in autumn when it will disturb wildlife the least.
- Best not to let the water in container ponds drop too low, topping up with rainwater where possible.
- Regularly check that wildlife ramps are still in position.

Further information

How to: [Bring water](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf) into your garden www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf

How to: Create and maintain ponds for wildlife (in progress)

How to: Improve a [balcony or window box](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_balcony.pdf) for wildlife www.wlgf.org/ht_balcony.pdf

Garden [ponds and boggy places](http://www.wlgf.org/ne27garden_ponds[1].pdf) booklet [www.wlgf.org/ne27garden_ponds\[1\].pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ne27garden_ponds[1].pdf)

Our web pages on water habitats starting [here](http://www.wlgf.org/water_ecology.html) www.wlgf.org/water_ecology.html

RHS [website](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=1048) guide for a wildlife container pond www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=1048