


Waterworks

TEXT
WENDY HELFENBAUM

PHOTOGRAPHY
PERRY MASTROVITO

Certified aquascape contractor
Jean Brûlé's 10 tips for gardeners
wanting to wade into the world of water.



OPPOSITE: A weeping willow (*Salix alba* 'Tristis'), ferns, ornamental grasses and hostas provide a picturesque setting for the pickerelweed- and waterlily-filled pond.

Gazing at the spectacular water garden on Diane Nadeau's sprawling riverside retreat, you'd never guess that it hasn't always been there. But in fact, it was entirely man-made just 12 years ago.

"When I bought the land in 2001, it was a forest," says Diane of her one-hectare property in the Laurentians in Saint-Colomban, Quebec. "I wanted to be near trees, water and mountains, but most of all, I dreamed of having a water garden."

After clearing a swath of trees to build her home, Diane – an avid gardener – took her design ideas outside. But long before planning and planting her gardens, building the outdoor fireplace and deciding where her cedar gazebo would go, Diane brought in a pro to create her aquatic sanctuary: Jean Brûlé, owner of Jardins Aquadesign in Val-Morin, Quebec, trained in horticulture at the Montreal Botanical Garden and, after schooling in Chicago, became the first Certified Aquascape Contractor (CAC) in Quebec. He built this water garden from the ground up. "We did it all. We dug, installed geo-textile cloth and a waterproof membrane. We also put down granite stones and river rocks, the filtration system and an electric pump," he says. Here's how he seamlessly integrated Diane's water garden into its natural surroundings.

1. DREAMING OF A LARGE POND? PREPARE FOR SOME MAJOR DIGGING. "I've landscaped two properties on my own before this, and yet I was still surprised at how much material had to be brought in," says Diane, whose pond measures five-by-six metres and contains 5,680 litres of water drawn from a nearby river. "It took lots of trips to haul the earth and river rocks needed for the bottom of the pond, not to mention getting all the big rocks bordering it from a local quarry," she adds. "If my backyard had already been landscaped, it would be difficult to make a water garden this big without ruining the yard."

2. RESPECT YOUR PROPERTY'S SCALE AND ITS TOPOGRAPHY. "Homeowners in flat suburban areas

often ask for a tall waterfall, but you can only build so high, otherwise it looks like a volcano," says Jean. "At Diane's house, we kept the waterfall low and built a babbling brook as well, making the waterfall harmonize with the land."

3. PLACE YOUR WATERFALL STRATEGICALLY. Direct the waterfall toward the space where you spend the most time, not only for the visual effect, but for the acoustics as well. "If it flows toward you, the sound will reflect toward you," says Jean. And never put a water garden at the bottom of a hill. Jean explains: "When you pump out the water during spring cleaning, water collects under the fabric membrane and deforms the pond."

4. PICK WATER-LOVING PLANTS.

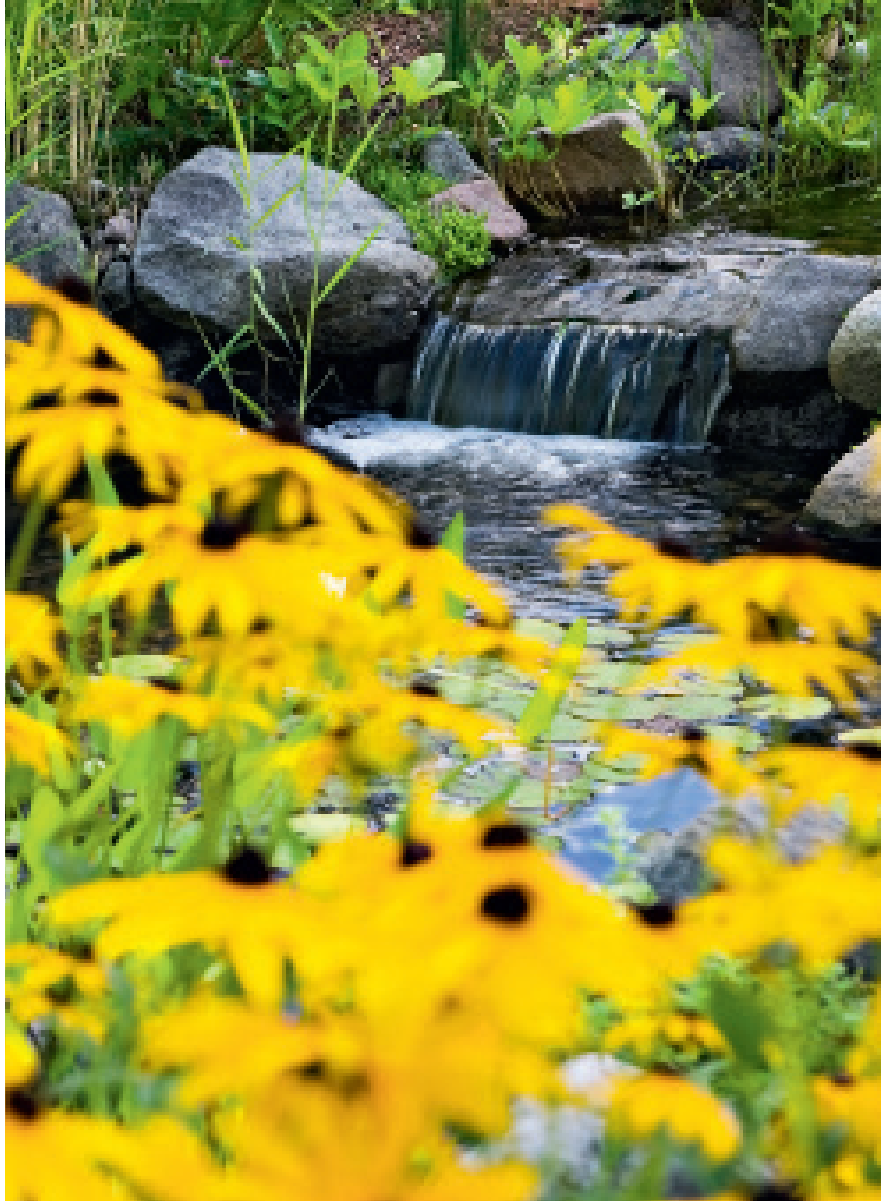
Choose plants that maintain water clarity, help filtration and bloom from early summer through fall. Waterlilies (*Nymphaea* spp. and cvs.) have floating foliage and lovely large flowers, while arrowheads (*Sagittaria* spp.) are great horizontal creepers. “I like pickerel-weed (*Pontederia cordata*) – indigenous from Nova Scotia to Ontario – for its spiky bluish purple flowers in summer, as well as the straw-like tufts of soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) and *Menyanthes trifoliata*, also known as bog bean, which has beautiful white blossoms and is native to every Canadian province and territory,” says Jean.

5. DON'T BE FRIGHTENED TO INTRODUCE FISH.

Japanese koi, comet-tailed goldfish and shubunkins (fancy, single-tailed goldfish) are all very hardy – they can thrive in shallow ponds, even during the winter. “People think you have to dig at least a metre down, but that’s a myth – just 60 centimetres is fine,” says Jean. “When the temperature rises above 8°C in spring, feed the fish protein-rich food for a few weeks, which will sustain them until fall, when they should be fed fat-rich foods. Install a floating heating element in mid-fall, and in winter, keep an opening in the ice so that methane and carbon monoxide can escape and oxygen can get in. Start the whole cycle again in spring.”

6. SPRING CLEAN YOUR POND, TOO.

A thorough spring cleaning keeps water gardens healthy. “Remove all the debris by hand, drain the water, capture the fish and check them for disease, examine the liner fabric for tears that could leak, power wash the pond, rinse out the dirty water several times, replace any rocks that have shifted or



ABOVE: The waterfall, visible beyond the black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii*), was directed toward the gazebo to optimize the calming trickling sounds since homeowner Diane Nadeau spends most of her time there.

LEFT: A native waterlily (*Nymphaea odorata*, Zone 4) bears fragrant flowers that open at dawn and close as evening approaches.



Diane had a hot tub and sound system installed in her cedar gazebo. "I spend a lot of time here in the evenings," she says. "It's so relaxing and peaceful. I've finally realized my dream of a water garden."

A POND IS
A *living,*
breathing
space AND,
LIKE A GOOD
BOTTLE OF WINE,
it improves
and evolves
WITH AGE.

fallen and check the underwater lighting," says Jean. "Then refill the pond, adding de-chlorinator if using tap water, and reinstall the filters and the pump, put everything back in it and restart the whole system."

7. BUY A BIOLOGICAL FILTER.

Biological filters create a place for beneficial bacteria to grow. Behind Diane's waterfall, Jean installed a bio-filter which maintains a clean ecosystem by breaking toxic ammonia down into nitrates that can then be absorbed and used by plants as they grow. Jean hid the filter in the landscape by surrounding it with plants.

8. DON'T BE DISCOURAGED BY A SMALL SPACE.

Short on space? Small water gardens can create big impact. If you have 4.5 square metres to spare, consider a mini aqua garden or a patio water garden. "Try having a fountain

in a small pond installed – or a pondless waterfall, which is very popular with people who lack space or have a limited budget," says Jean. "Patio fountains are a great option for those who don't want any maintenance at all."

9. PICK A PRIME SPOT TO TAKE IT ALL IN.

Diane's cedar gazebo arrived partly assembled; the ceiling and floor were built on-site. Then she stained the interior and had a hot tub and sound system installed. "I spend a lot of time here in the evenings. I have lights illuminating the trees, the shrubs, the pond and the river," says Diane.

10. CONSULT A QUALIFIED PROFESSIONAL.

"Many landscapers do interlocking pavers, turfgrass and ponds. I believe you can't be good at everything. I've specialized in water gardens for more than 20 years, because that's what I'm passionate about," says Jean.