

# Pond problems

GWF 282 PLM  
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Green water, nibbled plants and vanishing fish are all too common, but with no weedkillers or insecticides for aquatic landscapes, how do you achieve the perfect pond?

## Weeds

**Q** I have problems with stringy algae and water like pea soup. I keep cleaning my pond out, but it doesn't help. What's going wrong?

**A** It sounds as though you have a problem with blanketweed, an alga that grows in long strands. Pea-soup water points to another alga that remains suspended in the water. Blanketweed can be removed by winding it out on a rough stick or rake. Leave it on the edge for two days, so that small creatures can return to the pond and then compost it. To deter regrowth, and help clear the pea soup algae, you need to reduce the nutrients and light available. Add oxygenating plants and marginals to mop up nutrients, and floating plants to increase shade - aim to cover about half of the pond surface. Avoid fertiliser run-off from lawns, don't overfeed fish and use only aquatic loam as a planting medium. Don't wash out the pond or change the water, as it takes about two years for the pool to settle into its own natural balance.

**Q** Will straw control algae?

**A** It may help. You need barley straw, which releases an algae inhibitor as it breaks down. In a *Gardening Which?* members' trial, about half found it effective. Add the straw in a net bag at a rate of 10g (a small handful) per cubic metre of water. Add it in spring, and renew every two months.

**Q** Every year my pond gets smothered in duckweed. I keep removing it, but it keeps coming back. How can I get rid of it without harming the wildlife?

**A** Duckweed (*Lemna minor*) has become more of a problem recently, possibly due to milder winters. Ponds which are shaded and filled with decaying vegetation are particularly at risk, so cut back overhanging branches and net the pond in autumn to keep leaves out. Regular removal of the duckweed with a net is the best course of action. It doesn't compete well with other floating plants, so adding water lilies is a good idea. Introducing some more fish may also help. The carp family (which includes all goldfish) are voracious duckweed eaters.

**Q** Is there any way to eliminate fairy moss from my garden pond?

**A** Fairy moss (*Azolla filiculoides*) can be quite pretty in a small garden pond, but it divides rapidly in warm weather and can quickly cover the whole pool surface. It is a serious menace if allowed to colonise natural ponds where it crowds out native plants. Only total pond clearance, best carried out in April or May, can eradicate it but this can lead to other problems like algae and blanket weed. So in most cases regularly removing it with a net and doing this very thoroughly in autumn followed by a hard winter, should keep it in check.

## Other pond plants

**Q** I have a range of water lilies, but they don't flower and look sad. What am I doing wrong?

**A** Water lilies need a warm, sunny position to do well, and prefer still water, so are best planted away from fountains or pumps. New water lilies may take a few years to build up enough reserves to start flowering. After that, failure to flower can be due to being planted too deeply. If you know the varieties of your water lilies, check with a pond reference book or catalogue and raise the baskets on bricks if necessary. Alternatively, the plants may need feeding. Every summer feed with a special water lily fertiliser tablet pushed deep into the soil close to the roots.

**Q** What has attacked my water lilies? The leaves are full of holes and look more like doilies.

**A** Your water lilies may have been attacked by the water lily beetle (*Galerucella nymphaeae*). Once damaged, the leaves quickly rot. The adult beetles are yellowish-brown and 7mm long, and both beetles and larvae live on the upper leaf surface, making tunnels and holes in the leaf. If you can reach, pick them off and squash them. If the pond is too big, knock them off with a jet of water - other pond inhabitants should then eat them.

**Q I have a small wildlife pond, but I've been told not to plant bulrushes or reeds, as the roots damage the liner. Is this true?**

**A** Most reeds and rushes are too robust for the average garden pond and they can damage pond liners. Our native bulrush, (reed mace or *Typha latifolia*), is very vigorous, growing up to 3m high. There is a small bulrush, *Typha minima*, which is more suitable for garden ponds. Ask for factsheet GWF480 for more information on suitable native plants for garden ponds.

## Livestock

**Q I want to add goldfish to my wildlife pond. Can I do this?**

**A** Frogs and goldfish rarely co-exist happily in garden ponds and it's difficult to persuade frogs to give up a pond they are attracted to. To reduce the numbers of frogs you could try giving spawn to neighbours or local schools who want to encourage wildlife but generally don't move frogs or spawn far, as this can spread disease. They should not be moved to the wild for the same reason. One solution is to build another pond for the fish. This needs to be inaccessible to frogs, so you can leave the existing one to them and other wildlife.

**Q The fish in my pond keep dying. How can I stop this?**

**A** There are many reasons why fish die and you will need to do a bit of investigation to pinpoint the problem. You can buy water test kits to help diagnose water quality problems like the wrong pH or high levels of ammonia, nitrates or chlorine. Other problems can arise from gardening activities. Watch out for chemical poisoning: lawn fertilisers and weedkillers can easily wash into garden ponds. You also need to be wary when you use pesticides on nearby plants as these can wash into the water.

Other problems are more common at certain times of the year. In the spring the majority of pond water is cold, but on hot days the top few centimetres and the shallows can heat up considerably. Coupled with this, plant growth can be slow leading to reduced oxygen levels. Fish can also be affected by disease, so get to know your fish and keep an eye out for parasites, bacteria or fungal problems. You should try to protect them from other wildlife predators (cats, frogs, herons, kingfishers etc) and physical trauma from being sucked into pumps or filters. Also remember that stress can kill. So avoid overcrowding, or repeatedly netting or moving the fish.

**Q I removed the leaf net over my pond this spring but two days later all our beautiful fish were gone. I have seen a huge crane-like bird near the pond. Is this the culprit?**

**A** The chances are your fish were taken by a heron. Unfortunately for gardeners, herons regard ponds as their version of a bird table which we have kindly stocked up for them. If you decide to replace your fish, fix a trip wire 30cm high and 30cm away from the edge of the pool. This generally deters herons as they like to land away from the pool then walk to the edge. If this set-up looks unsightly, you can disguise it with some strategic planting.

## Liners

**Q My pond liner has been damaged near the top. Is it possible to repair it and how?**

**A** Repair kits, along the lines of tyre puncture repair kits, are available. You should not have to move edging slabs, but the area to be patched needs to be completely dry, so you may have to lower the water level a couple of inches below the leak, and this may mean removing some of the marginal plants for a while too.

## General

**Q I have a goldfish pool about 3m across, and a young grandson. How do I keep them apart?**

**A** A one metre high chainlink fence should be effective, and could be disguised with plants, but reduces your view. The alternative is a grid over the water. For an informal pool, reinforcing mesh used for concrete may be suitable, if anchored and supported round the edges and in the centre. Painted black it will barely show. For a formal pool, you could commission an ornamental grid from a local blacksmith which would then be a feature in its own right.

**Q I have a problem with leaves falling into my pond. When is the best time to clean out the pond, and how do I stop it in the future?**

**A** Tree leaves are a problem with garden ponds. Removing low branches may help, and will let in more light. Otherwise you need to net the pond in autumn. There isn't an ideal time to clear out the leaves, but the autumn, after they have fallen but before they decay, is best and it doesn't involve removing all the water. This is the least harmful time for wildlife - most amphibians will have left, and insects will be overwintering in the mud at the bottom and should survive a little disturbance, if you return some of the mud.

## More information

Pond Conservation  
School of Life Sciences,  
Oxford Brookes University,  
Gipsy Lane, Headington,  
Oxford OX3 0BP  
01865 483249  
[www.pondstrust.org.uk](http://www.pondstrust.org.uk)

Froglife  
9 Swan Court, Cygnet Park,  
Hampton, Peterborough  
PE7 0LG  
[www.froglife.org](http://www.froglife.org)