

# Water Features

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It's always been interesting to me that desert dwellers throughout history have been attracted to water features. Persian, Roman, Islamic, and Spanish gardens all feature water in some way whether channels, long ponds, overflowing courtyard fountains, or wall fountains. There is something about having the sound and smell of water nearby that soothes the soul. However, because water evaporates so quickly in the desert the difficult part is keeping the water feature small so we don't waste it. Using a pump with water that recirculates, avoiding water spray features, or reducing the exposed surface area are all means by which we can limit the waste.

There are a number of ways that you can incorporate water into your landscape. The largest of these is usually a pond which can be built with or without a stream. The stream of course exposes more surface and increases the odds of a leak. If you choose to have fish, you'll need to consider the depth because fish need to overwinter where they won't freeze. Also, they need the extra water to escape owls, cats, and raccoons. You'll want to use three types of plants: filtration, marginal, and shading/floating plants. Filtration plants include anacharis, cabomba, water lettuce, and water hyacinth which use their roots to help keep the water clean. Marginal or bog plants soften the edges of the pond and make it look more natural. These are plants usually sit on a shelf and want water just over the top of their soil as a bog would be. Examples would be dwarf cattail, papyrus, horsetail, sweet flag, and various rushes. Shading plants keep sun away from the water surface and include plants like water lilies and lotus with big leaves. Azolla and duckweed which are tiny plants that float on the surface are another way to provide shade. You want shade on the pond surface because algae, the bane of all pond owners, grows best with lots of sun. But plants alone won't keep the pond clean so you'll probably need a pond filter and something like Algaefix to keep the algae in check.

Ponds require a source of water, electricity, and space for an external filter. You need to be able to get in and out of the pond easily to clean it. Water lilies, at least the hardy ones, need to be placed lower in the pond to overwinter. Water lilies are expensive to replace so you might not want to use the tropical ones. A pond is a big commitment and this just scratches the surface for what you need to know. I recommend books by Helen Nash for more information.

A fountain is a smaller commitment. My favorite fountains are ones that have a hole drilled through a ceramic pot bottom, a rock or boulder, or through a piece of granite either tall, spherical, or in a wheel shape. Water flows up through the hole and slowly over the surface into river pebbles at the base which hide the mechanics - a large reservoir for the water, the pump, filter, and tubing. Birds love this type of fountain. Algae is still an issue as is calcium stains from our hard water. You might consider a solar powered pump for this size feature.

A similar fountain to this is one that uses a ceramic container with pebbles over the reservoir, but has some form of spout to provide the water. These containers have no hole drilled in the bottom. Water from the reservoir is recirculated through the spout and into the container overflowing to the pebbles. Depending on the size of the container you can have plants in them or not. Both this style and the previous style of fountain may use a bubbler to provide surface interest.

The fountains seen most often in the Southwest are the two or three tiered Moorish courtyard style that feed water to the top ornament and then let it cascade into the lower tiers. They can be built of concrete, metal, or ceramic. Or you can place a Spanish style fountain on a courtyard wall. These usually flow into a visible basin at ground level. They may also be tiered.

An interesting fountain I saw at the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens at University of Texas El Paso has metal bells hung in a spiral from a central pole. The water is recirculated up the pole with semi-circles of drippers in the top plane. Then the water falls from the drippers onto the bells which hang on flexible arcs welded into the central pole. The bells sound like chimes and you hear the water dripping. The fountain is partially in the shade so the dripping water doesn't evaporate as quickly.

There are as many styles of water features as the mind can imagine. I hope after reading this article that I've given an itch to create one. Be sure to place it where you can see it and hear it.

