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Understanding Aquascaping

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Does your pond elicit ho hum reactions? Is it in need of some pizzazz? Why not aquascape! This term means planting aquatic and wetland plants for the enhancement of a freshwater system. The plants provide color, texture, and wildlife habitat along with helping improve the pond's water quality. By properly landscaping the pond's banks and shallow areas with desirable aquatic plants, the amount of sediment, nutrients, and pesticides flowing into the pond are decreased. The plants help stabilize the banks to prevent erosion and filters soil out of stormwater runoff. Aquascaping also reduces the amount of algae present in the pond because the plants help take up excess nutrients, which are their food source, from stormwater runoff. In addition, the plants provide shade, which also helps prevent algae growth by reducing sunlight available for photosynthesis. In order to have a successful experience, here are some things to consider.

Before embarking on aquascaping, it is important to determine if this action can be done legally. Some stormwater ponds have a Stormwater Discharge permit, which contains specific maintenance instructions. You should do some research to determine the following: ownership of the pond, if there is a Stormwater Discharge permit, if a drainage easement covers the pond, who is allowed to conduct maintenance of the pond, and if there are restrictions on pond maintenance.

The next step is to survey the pond and determine the different water depths because this will aid you in selecting plants. Aquatic plants like specific water levels and must be placed in the correct spot in order to survive. There is a rich variety of native aquatic plants available that range from trees and shrubs, which endures periodic flooding, to grasses, which are totally submerged in the water.

Native plants are a good choice because they are easier to maintain than non-native species. They require little to no fertilizer or extra water and will help prevent the spread of invasive exotics, which are non-native plants that flourish so well in an area that they take over and displace native plants. In addition, many native aquatic plants grow slowly and require little maintenance.

Since aquatic plant choices can be overwhelming, there are many resources available to you. The University of Florida/IFAS Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants' website (<http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu>) is a wealth of information about both native and non-native vegetation. In addition, there is an aquatic plant identification deck available from the UF/IFAS bookstore (<http://ifasbooks.ufl.edu>) that has pictures and descriptions of the many aquatic plants. Your local county extension service may also help you pick the appropriate plants for your pond. After you have picked out the plants, make a detailed plan of where they will be placed in the pond and how many. In order to prevent overcrowding, contact your local county extension service for quantity recommendations.

Planting aquatic plants is relatively easy but handle them carefully. If the plants aren't placed in the sediment immediately, they should be wrapped in wet newspaper to keep them from drying out along with keeping them in a cool and shaded place to prevent overheating. Any planting should be done in the early morning or late afternoon with deep water zone plants going in first, shallow water zone plants next, and shoreline plants last.

Once aquatic plants are established, they require maintenance. Unfavorable plant species can inhabit the pond, and vegetation can become uncontrollable if the pond is left unmanaged. When this situation occurs, getting the pond vegetation back to a manageable level can be difficult. In addition, an unmanaged pond can have problems with drainage and mosquito production. With frequent attention to potential problems, the vegetation can be easily managed. The following practices are commonly used to manage aquatic plants: modifying landscape practices surrounding the pond, hand removal of plants, plant-eating fish, and herbicides. With the proper selection of aquatic plants, maintenance can be kept at a manageable level. Reputable pond management companies can assist with most vegetation management.

With a little planning, time, and effort, your pond will be the talk of the town.