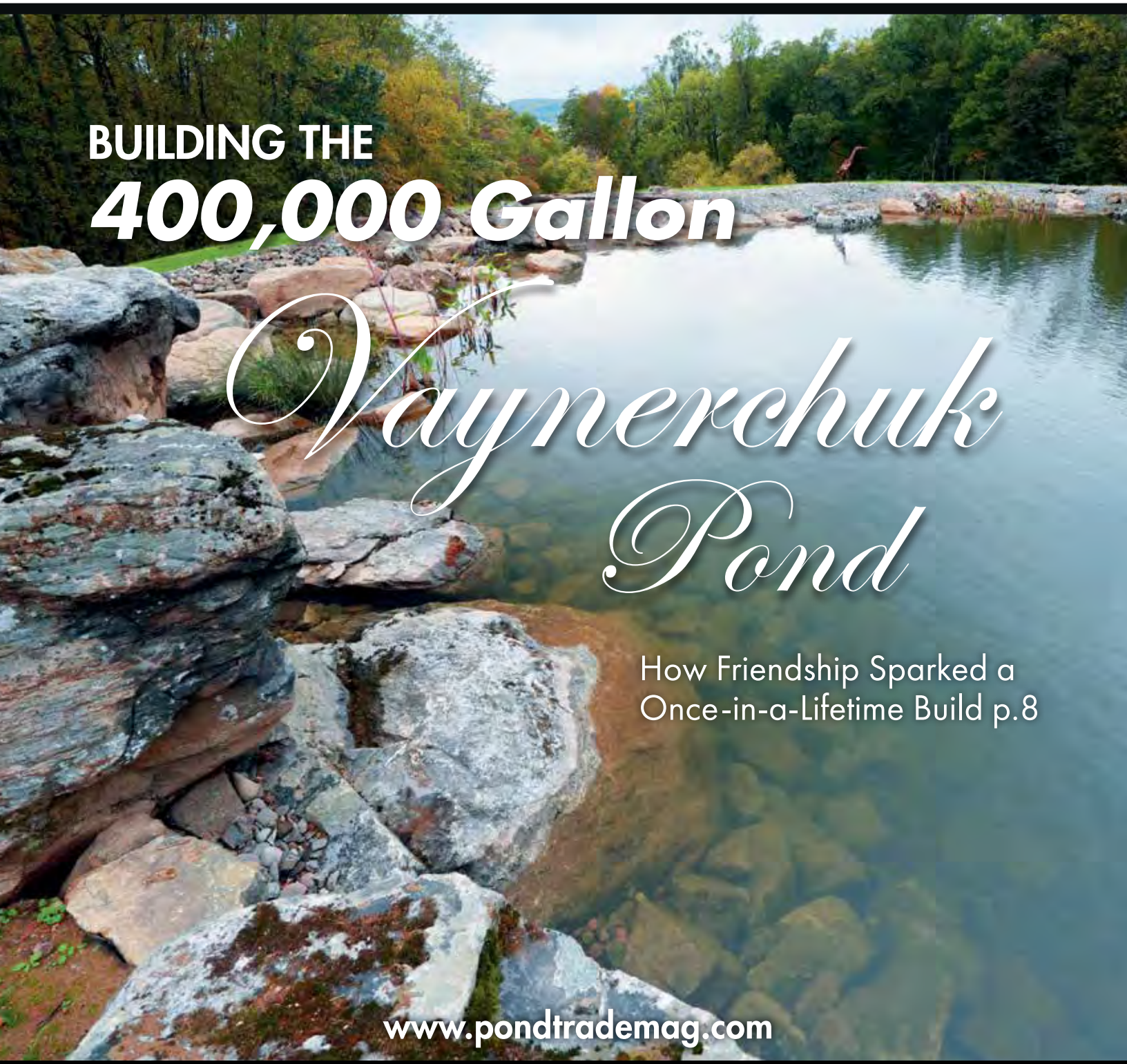
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BUILDING THE 400,000 Gallon Vaynerchuk Pond

How Friendship Sparked a Once-in-a-Lifetime Build p.8

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Carving Stone in Winter p.19 | Vegas East p.34 | Waterlily Weigh-Off p.42

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8 **Vaynerchuck Family Pond Build** POND CONSTRUCTION

What began as a simple sales lead grew into a story of friendship, collaboration, and the creation of one of the largest residential koi ponds ever built. In this feature, **Brian Fitzsimmons** shares how a shared passion for koi and craftsmanship brought together industry leaders—and the Vaynerchuk family—to build a 400,000-gallon legacy.

19 **Carving Stone in Winter**

In the depths of a Chicago winter, **Larry Carnes** and his team at Reflections Water Gardens built a towering grotto, waterfall, and rain curtain against the odds. Through freezing temps and tight timelines, they turned a challenging job site into a stunning backyard escape—proving that craftsmanship thrives in any season.

25 **Koi Fest: A Celebration of Koi and Community**

Now in its fourth year, Fitz's Fish Ponds' Koi Fest has become the nation's premier koi event, bringing together hobbyists, breeders, and pond professionals for a weekend of koi, culture, and community.

34 **Vegas East: A Backyard Oasis**

Inspired by a vision for a natural retreat, "Vegas East" redefines backyard luxury with an 80-by-100-foot recreational pond that blends elegance, craftsmanship, and nature. Designed and built through a seamless collaboration of skilled artisans and pond professionals, **Brent Bivona** captures the essence of this living oasis, transforming outdoor living into an unforgettable experience.

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42 **Waterlily Weigh-Off**

Erin Bird shares how a simple experiment at Denver Botanic Gardens evolved into a global competition uniting nearly 50 institutions across nine countries. The Waterlily Weigh-Off has become a viral celebration of science, creativity, and community—proving that even a single leaf can make waves worldwide

49 **Aquascaping Unveiled**

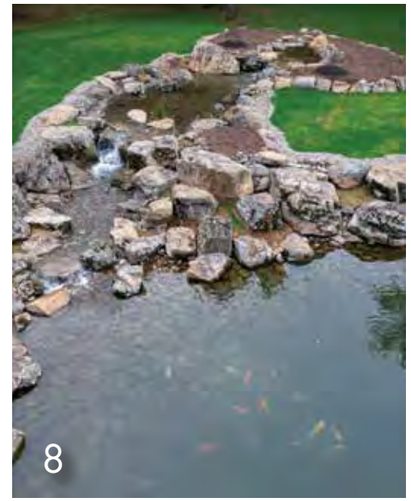
Johnathon Butkus reveals how the art of aquascaping brings the beauty and creativity of pond design indoors. From sculpting rock and wood to cultivating lush aquatic plants, this growing hobby offers pond enthusiasts a way to stay connected to nature year-round—combining artistry, science, and serenity inside the glass walls of an aquarium.

55 **When Your Pond Runs Out of Air**

Still water can hide a silent crisis. In this eye-opening feature, **Patrick Simmsgeiger** explains how oxygen depletion leads to murky water, foul odors, and fish kills—and how proper aeration, circulation, and timing can restore balance to even the most stressed pond ecosystems.

59 **From Overworked to Automated**

Josh Meunier delivers a wake-up call to contractors and small-business owners, revealing how AI and automation are reshaping efficiency, customer retention, and profitability.









Upcoming **Events**

2025

November 5 - 7
Atlantic-Oase
Hilton Cleveland Downtown Hotel
Cleveland, Ohio
www.atlantic-oase.com

November 9 - 13
Mid-South Ponds Retreat
Stanton, TN
www.midsouthpondretreat.com

2026

March 6 - 8
Central Florida Koi and Goldfish Show
Wyndham Avanti Resort
Orlando, FL
www.cfks.org

March 7 - 8
Koi Club of San Diego 36th Annual Koi Show
Del Mar Fairgrounds
Del Mar, CA
www.koiclubofsandiego.org

March 11 - 13
Water Garden Expo
Grand Casino Hotel & Resort
Shawnee, OK
www.wgexpo.com

March 27 - 29
All American Koi Show
Las Vegas, NV
www.allamericankoishow.com

April 10 - 12
Music City Koi Show
Nashville Zoo at Grassmere
Nashville, TN
www.tnkoi.org/music-city-koi-show

August 15 - 18
Pondemonium
Aqualand
St. Charles, IL
www.aquascapeinc.com/professionals/pondemonium

August 21 - 22
Koi Fest 2026
Fitz's Fish Ponds Farm
Milford, NJ
www.fitzfishponds.com

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Publisher's Perspective



Every so often, an issue of POND Trade comes together with such synergy that it reminds me exactly why I fell in love with this industry — and this one is a perfect example. Across every story — from monumental pond builds to quiet moments of aquatic artistry — the common thread is collaboration. It's the energy that emerges when creativity, craftsmanship and community intersect.

As I reflect on features like "Vaynerchuk Family Pond Build" (p. 8), where passion and partnership produced a 400,000-gallon masterpiece, or "Carving Stone in Winter" (p. 19), where Larry Carnes and his team turned frigid adversity into beauty, I'm reminded that no one achieves greatness alone. Our industry thrives when we share knowledge, work together and celebrate one another's wins.

That spirit shines through "Fitz's Fish Ponds Koi Fest" (p. 25), now a national gathering point for koi enthusiasts and professionals alike, and through the international reach of "The Waterlily Weigh-Off" (p. 42), proving that even a single leaf — or a single idea — can ripple outward and inspire connection across the globe.

Whether it's a massive collaborative build like "Vegas East" (p. 34), the quiet innovation behind better pond aeration discussed in "When Your Pond Runs Out of Air" (p. 55), or the artistry revealed in "Aquascaping Unveiled," (p.49) every page in this issue celebrates how we're all part of something bigger than ourselves.

In "From Overworked to Automated" (p. 59), we take that idea one step further by exploring how artificial intelligence and automation are helping business owners work smarter, not harder. It's a fascinating look at how technology can elevate creativity and efficiency, freeing entrepreneurs to focus on the relationships and craftsmanship that define our field.

The pond industry has always been about more than water and stone. It's about relationships — between builders and clients, between hobbyists and nature, and between colleagues who might start as competitors but end up as friends. That's what makes this community so unique. We don't just build ponds; we build connections that help our entire industry grow stronger.

Nowhere is that spirit of collaboration more alive than in the "Water Artisans of the Year" contest. This annual celebration defines our craft. Whether you're a seasoned veteran or just getting started, this is your chance to be recognized, inspire others and connect with the industry on a bigger stage. Winners will be featured in POND Trade Magazine and remembered for their creativity, skill and passion.

As you read through this issue, I encourage you to look for opportunities to collaborate — because every great project, idea and innovation begins when we come together.

Until the next splash,
Lauren Nolan
Publisher, POND Trade Magazine





BUILDING THE 400,000 Gallon *Vaynerchuk Pond*

How Friendship Sparked a Once-in-a-Lifetime Build



by Brian Fitzsimmons,
Owner & CEO, Fitz's Fish Ponds

People see the machinery, the 20-foot waterfall, the 400,000 gallons—and they assume the story begins with blueprints. It didn't. It began with a sales lead that didn't close, a bottle of wine, and a friendship.

The Origin of a 400,000-Gallon Idea

About three and a half years ago, Sasha Vaynerchuk came in as a prospect for a natural pond renovation. My proposal was more than he wanted to spend, so he planned to use a local excavation company. In most cases, that's the end of the file. Instead, we kept talking. I invited Sasha to Koi Fest; he came—and then he kept coming. Quick check-ins turned into 30-minute calls about business, family, and the rollercoaster we both know as entrepreneurship.


The group gathers for a photo with Gary Vaynerchuk after he gave them some industry specific marketing advice.













Sasha gave it to me straight. He critiqued my Green Brook, NJ store signage and pushed me toward online sales, drawing parallels to decades of lessons at Wine Library. He wasn't a consultant; he was a friend who cared enough to tell me the truth—and introduce me to his son, Gary.

I met Gary at a backyard barbecue that somehow became a full-court, four-on-four basketball game. I can now confirm that he's as competitive as advertised. By the end of the day, my teammate AJ and I had a new nickname from the Vaynerchuks: "The Koi Boys." Since then we've crossed paths at dinners, events, and even at Gary's Flyfish Club over the next year. What's remained constant is the mutual respect in that family—especially around Sasha's passions, like koi.

For months we talked about his dream: a body of water that feels like a lake but lives like a world-class koi pond. When the dates finally aligned, the only slot that worked for the family happened to also be the week leading up to Koi Fest 2025—our biggest weekend of the year. Naturally, I said yes anyway.

My Vice President of Fitz's Fish Ponds, and I mapped out the entire effort on a flight to Vegas. By the time we landed we had a press release written, web content developed, a logo concept, partners and a schedule ready to bring to our team. We knew this would be a big undertaking— for our team, our friends and our vendors, but the bet was simple: friendship plus craftsmanship equals a once-in-a-lifetime platform for our industry.

Assembling the Dream Team

Big builds demand big partnerships. Atlantic Oase donated all equipment and materials and sent leadership on site—Jeff Weemhoff, Tyler Fisher, Andrew Bell, Patrick Bell, and filtration mastermind Demi Fortuna. We invited Eric Triplett (The Pond Digger, CA)—who brought Kathy Jo and Austin from his team—plus Shane Hemphill and Heath Webb (Art of the Yard, CO) to collaborate with our FFP crews. Rounding out the core were Larry Carnes (Reflections Water Gardens, IL), Dan Johanson (Focal Point Features, TX), Eric Twigg (MidWest Aquatics, IO), and the entire FFP construction team.

Toward the finish, PPA co-founders, Ana Arntson and Craig McBride jumped in. The whole build was documented beginning-to-end by Yvo de Wal (The Koi Partner), and industry friends Tim Waddington and Mark McKinney flew in from across the pond to witness the project and attend Koi Fest.

The goal of this project, in addition to providing the Vaynerchuk family with a beautiful pond to enjoy for years to come, was to raise the bar for what a natural koi environment can be at residential scale.

I wanted to assemble a team that would leave smarter than they arrived and keep the learning public so the whole industry would benefit. I didn't want a circus of 30 contractors; I wanted a tight circle of 7–10 people I'd happily grill a steak with in my backyard—pros who would both teach and learn. FFP made a six-figure commitment as a company; participants invested to be on-site; and our Atlantic Oase backed us with gear and leadership. We handpicked seasoned builders, a precision crane operator, and a best-in-class filtration brain trust, working shoulder-to-shoulder with our construction crew.

The entire process was documented for the community. Although we were small on headcount, we were huge on value—the exact room we wanted around this project, built to deepen the client's love for koi and give the trade a clear playbook.

Building with Clay and Stone

Sasha's property gave us a gift: a natural clay bottom. Rather than disturb the seal, we laid geotextile fabric over the clay to control particulates, then armored with stone, logs, and fish habitat. That's how you get clarity in a clay pond without ruining the clay.

The stonework came from the land itself. We harvested hundreds of tons of boulders from Sasha's forest—many over 20 tons—so the pond would appear natural with the property and the land. The signature piece—quickly dubbed "Sasha's Rock"—was a jagged, ~30-ton monster that snapped brand-new lifting straps before we solved the pick with more straps and a better angle.

Filtration at Mega Scale

Demi Fortuna (Atlantic Oase) designed a wetlands (bog) filter sized by flow, not square footage—critical at this scale:

- **Target flow:** ~40,000 GPH through the bog
- **Eco-Blocks:** 80 Atlantic Eco-Blocks
- **Velocity principle:** Slow the water to ~100 GPH per sq. in. (≈ 350–375 GPH per Eco-Block) so all sediment drops out

















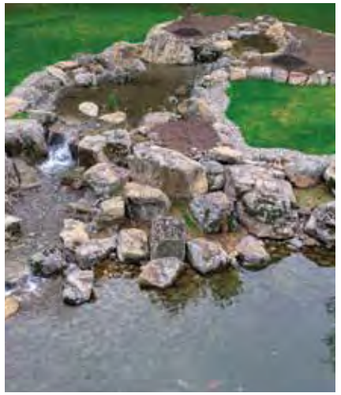
















- **Serviceability:** 4 intake bays with valves for regular "flushes" that send organics to the woods—no buried sludge, no teardown cleans

On the draw side, we built two double intake bays (instead of four singles) to protect the clay and simplify hydraulics. Each bay houses Oase Eco Expert pumps. We re-oriented the volutes to vertical for vault use; long runs (150+ ft) transition from 3-inch to 4-inch to minimize loss; Fernco unions allow fast pump swaps. Each pump can deliver 10,000–11,500 GPH while remaining energy-efficient.

Heavy Iron, Heavier Lifts

Then it rained.

Clay slopes went slick the day the big machine arrived. Eric Twigg (Mid West Aquatics) piloted an 80,000-lb excavator down narrow, fresh access with bucket-down braking and careful counter-rotation so we didn't scar the clay "bathtub." To keep momentum, the team pre-strapped boulders in the woods; spotters ran hand signals; picks were slow and surgical. "Sasha's Rock" alone burned through straps rated to 46,000 lbs (basket) until a three-strap configuration and new pick point did the trick.

Turning the View to the House

In the original pond, the old spillway faced away from the home, which offered limited visibility for Sasha and his family. To offer a more appealing design, we carved a major cut into the hillside and re-graded so the falls would now present to the house and drive. The result ended up being a ~20-foot-wide waterfall that can run ~36,000 GPH—a sightline you feel from the porch.

Sasha, in his Own Words

Edited from an on-site conversation recorded for The Pond Digger podcast

"Quite honestly, I did not envision the scale. I had an idea, but not this. It's pretty impressive—and you guys are doing a great job.

All the rock came off my property. Hundreds of tons from the forest—logs too—so it blends with the woods. I've set a lot of stone here over the years; I like to be in the hole, looking at the faces, making sure a big boulder lands right. Larry's a pro, and the collaboration Brian put together is amazing—people came from all over.

With plants in, it's going to be beautiful. I've got deer, so we'll be smart about where things go. On the utilities, they just raised electric; maybe we run part of the system in winter or look at solar.

This property started as a piece of a structure and a lot of trees—I've been developing it for years. My wife's favorite part is that every rock came from here and was reconfigured into something special. If my health allows, I'd love to go to Japan with the FFP crew one day."







Beyond the Build

People will remember the drone shots and the waterfall. I'll remember the why.

This project happened because a prospect became a friend. Because Sasha picked up the phone to push me on signage, to nudge me toward e-commerce, to invite me to sit with his family and talk business and life. Because Gary, with minutes scheduled like gold, still shows up for the people who matter to him—and made space for a pond that means something to his dad.

For my team, the Vaynerchuk pond was a chance to collaborate at the edge of our craft, to prove we can execute under pressure, and to show a broader audience what responsible, naturalistic, serviceable pond design looks like at residential scale. For Sasha, it's a living legacy: grandkids on the shoreline, koi gliding under ledges, a glass of wine by the water at day's end.

We moved rock and water. But what we really built was a testament to friendship, trust, and the belief that our industry can aim higher—together.

About the Author



Brian Fitzsimmons, is the CEO and founder of Fitz's Fish Ponds, which was established in 2008. Today, FFP is a 75+ member team that includes passionate professionals who design, build, and service ponds, waterfalls, and outdoor living spaces across the Tri-State Area. With retail stores in NJ, PA and TN, plus a koi farm in Milford, NJ, FFP offers everything from hand-selected koi to full backyard transformations. The team also travels to Japan three times a year to source top-quality koi and lead immersive KoiTrips for hobbyists. Driven by creativity and innovation, Brian continues to grow FFP into a leader in the koi, pond and outdoor living industry.

Quotes from the **Build**



Jeff Weemhoff, *Atlantic-Oase*
The Sasha and Gary Vee Pond Build was an amazing opportunity to showcase the artistic and design capabilities of many of the best pond builders in the industry. It also brought together two of the premier water feature companies in America, Atlantic-Oase and Fitz's Fish Ponds. The participants received a once in a lifetime opportunity to listen and interact with Sasha and Gary Vee. We were able to ask specific landscape and social media marketing questions and hear Gary explain strategic ways to capture more leads, get more followers, and differentiate yourself from the competition. I'd personally like to thank Fitz for partnering with Atlantic-Oase as it truly was an amazing week, all topped off by the fantastic Koi Fest hosted by Fitz.



Eric Twigg,
Midwest Aquatics
For me this was another big project working alongside the Fitz Team. Being around the other builders and the way we pulled our different strengths together on this project was definitely memorable. We all learned bits from each other. The most fun was operating the giant excavator and navigating the challenge of doing so in the rain.



Eric Triplett,
The Pond Digger
Ten years ago, I told Brian Fitzsimmons the day would come when he'd build a pond for the Vaynerchuk family, and to get to know Gary Vee before he ever met him. Proximity = ROI you can't measure with a calculator. Being on location for this pond build was incredible. You don't grow from an event like this by watching the reels and YouTube Shorts, the growth comes from standing shoulder to shoulder with killers in the game like Carnes, Hemphill, Heath, Johanson, Fortuna, and the Fitz Fam. Proximity like that doesn't just inspire you, it rewires you.



Dan Johanson,
Focal Point Features
Getting out of my routine and working alongside others in the trade reminded me why I love building waterfalls. I picked up new tricks, shared a lot of laughs, and gained a whole new passion for what we do. I came in expecting to play a small part, but ended up hands-on with boulder placement, learning new skills, and building lasting friendships. The experience showed me that collaboration fuels growth, leadership is about knowing when to guide and when to support, and real progress comes when you step far outside your comfort zone—like moving 30,000-pound boulders with an 80,000-pound machine. Gary Vee also inspired me to share more of our craft on social media. This was the biggest project I've ever been part of, and I walked away with more confidence, more skills, and unforgettable memories.



Craig McBride, *PPA*
I gained some valuable knowledge and inspiration to take what I do to the next level. Seeing the community we're helping to strengthen is rewarding.



Heath Webb, *Art of the Yard*
Collaborating on the Gary Vee pond and waterfall build was an incredible experience. Being part of such a unique project alongside an inspiring team was both exciting and humbling. I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to contribute, learn, and create something so special—it's an experience I'll always be thankful for!



Shane Hemphill, *Art of the Yard*
Working alongside Heath on the Gary Vee project was an unforgettable experience. We had the privilege of collaborating with some of the most talented contractors in the country to create something truly extraordinary. The energy, teamwork, and craftsmanship that went into this build made it one of the highlights of my career.



Demi Fortuna, *Atlantic-Oase*
I had the privilege of working with some of the industry's best at the Sasha & Gary Vee Build in New Jersey this past August, and it was an absolute blast! Brian Fitzsimmons assembled an outstanding crew to rebuild the massive pond at Gary Vee's father Sasha's home. We got muddy alongside Shane, Eric, Larry, Dan, and the incredible Fitz's Fish Ponds team, showcasing innovative filtration techniques in an unforgettable setting. Beyond the build, the experience was enriched by the generosity of Gary Vee, Yvo the Koi Partner, Eric, and Shane, who shared invaluable insights into social media and marketing. We were treated to a masterclass from influencers reaching millions of viewers. Huge thanks to Brian for organizing such an amazing project.



Ana Arntson, *PPA*
Watching everyone in their element—happy, working hard, and collaborating—I'm reminded that the real joy of this industry lies in one thing: community.



Larry Carnes,
Reflections Water Gardens
I'm always learning and it was a great experience to work along the side of others. Going into the forest in Sasha's backyard selecting the boulders like the one we coined "Sasha's Rock" was the coolest experience.To incorporate these into the project I told Brian, "Brian you get me a bigger machine and I'll build you something f****** awesome."



Ponds thrive with the right conditions. So do businesses. Creating a strategy to help business owners and entrepreneurs integrate their personal goals with their business plans while maximizing the overall value of the business is the right foundation for success.

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Lessons on **Social Media & Business Growth** from the Vaynerchuk Pond Build Q&A

by Lauren Nolan,
Publisher POND Trade Magazine

When Gary Vaynerchuk showed up at his father Sasha's 400,000-gallon pond build in New Jersey, he didn't just watch the machines and marvel at the boulders. He spent time with a circle of pond professionals and manufacturers, answering questions and dropping actionable advice. The impromptu Q&A ended up being less about koi and more about how niche businesses like pond construction can thrive in today's shifting digital landscape.

What followed was a masterclass in "interest media," content strategy, and high-ticket sales trust-building—directly tailored to the pond industry.

The Power of Niche and Passion

Gary emphasized that pond building is perfectly suited for deep social engagement. With six-figure projects, passionate koi collectors, and unique artistry, "you don't need millions of customers—you need the right ones," he told the group. Interest in $100,000 koi or expansive water features signals a high-net-worth audience, and that makes the pond industry prime territory for targeted, story-driven content.







Platforms That Matter Most

While many builders lean heavily on Instagram and TikTok, Gary insisted that the biggest untapped opportunities lie elsewhere:

Facebook & LinkedIn: "That's where the money is," he said, pointing to the density of high-net-worth users.

Snapchat Spotlight: "There's less competition. Fewer eyeballs, but no supply. That's opportunity."

IRL Live Streaming: Streaming six-hour workdays on Twitch or YouTube might sound tedious, but Gary described it as "a humongous opportunity." The raw, ASMR-like process of rock setting or filtration installs can pull in curious audiences.

Podcasts: "There's room for multiple shows in this space," Gary said. "Both collectors and creators have stories to tell—and demand is bigger than supply."

Content Frequency and Amplification

Gary's message was blunt: post more. He suggested, "Every day. Every single day," he said. "You never know what day someone decides they're ready to buy a $50,000 pond." He also warned against overthinking "bad" content. Posts with low views still teach valuable lessons, and anything underperforming can be archived later. On the flip side, when something does hit organically—whether 100,000 views instead of the usual 1,000—that's when builders should invest $1,000–$3,000 in ads to amplify reach.

Interest Media and Personal Passions

The biggest shift Gary wanted pond builders to understand is the move from follower media to interest media. Algorithms now push content to people who care about the topic, regardless of whether they follow you.

That's why posting about your own passions—golf, cigars, cooking, bourbon—can be just as powerful as koi footage. "A cigar video might get you more pond leads than three months of koi posts," Gary explained. "Because cigar culture skews high-net-worth. They see your profile, they see you build koi ponds, and now you've got a lead."

The key, he added, is a tight profile bio with clear contact info, so virality connects directly to your business.

Trust, Service, and High-Ticket Sales

For projects costing $50,000–$100,000+, Gary argued that trust matters more than reach. Pin service-oriented videos with direct calls to action—"Call me if you want to learn"—and don't be afraid to produce content titled "Who Shouldn't Hire My Company."

"When you genuinely tell people who you're not right for, it builds credibility," Gary said. "That honesty makes people want to hire you."

Process Over Results

Finally, Gary reminded the group not to obsess over vanity metrics. "The second you stop worrying about a million subscribers is the second you're more likely to get a million," he said.

Instead, focus on creative best practices such as strong thumbnails, the first three seconds of a video, and the clarity of storytelling. Platforms will keep evolving, but those fundamentals endure.

Why It Matters

For many pond professionals, Gary's advice reframed how to think about marketing in a niche, high-ticket industry. From daily posting across multiple platforms to embracing passions outside ponds, his message was clear: stop chasing perfect results, start sharing authentically, and let interest media do its work.

Or, as Gary summed it up with a smile: "Flow with the friction. Post more. Serve first. That's how you win."

For pond professionals, Gary Vaynerchuk's advice was more than motivational soundbites—it was a practical blueprint for thriving in a high-ticket, niche market. By leaning into authenticity, posting consistently across platforms, and amplifying what works, pond builders can capture attention far beyond their existing followers. More importantly, by focusing on trust, service, and process over vanity metrics, they can connect with the kind of clients who don't just want a pond—they want an experience and a relationship. For an industry built on passion and craftsmanship, Gary's reminder was clear: the opportunity isn't just in the water, it's in the story you share.

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For three months, a 60-ton crane worked nearly six days a week, setting massive stones within inches of the home's finished exterior.

CARVING STONE IN *Winter*

Building a Waterfall Grotto Against the Odds

by Larry Carnes,
Reflections Water Gardens

Last year at this time, we were beginning construction on a massive grotto, waterfall and rain curtain in Palos Park, Illinois. While the winter started out mild, we work in the Chicago area. We knew what was coming.

Some might shake their heads at starting such an ambitious build late in the season but at Reflections Water Gardens, we don't shy away from a challenge.

Platinum Pool, a leading builder in Wheeling, Illinois, invited us to join their team. Their job was to install an Olympic-size swimming pool with amenities, including a 30-foot elbow slide and three hot tubs.

The project ran parallel with the construction of the client's home—a lodge-style estate situated on an existing horse farm. Beginning late in the season meant the family could enjoy the water features as soon as the weather turned warm.

Our role was to build a 30-foot-high, 25-foot-wide grotto using an elevated deck as its framework. Our list included creating a towering waterfall on one end and a rain curtain shielding a sunken pool on the other.

More than an add-on, the grotto was to be the pool's focal point. The water feature had to feel massive and natural, yet blend seamlessly with the pool, landscape and the home's architecture.

According to the design, the spiral staircase was to provide access to the elevated deck and slide. The towering waterfall was to drop from the top of the grotto on the hot tub side. The sunken pool with



Our mini skid steer rests on a makeshift "road" built over the sunken pool, giving us access to the worksite from the inside. Our crew sets mortar as a crane holds the rock in place.



Diesel heaters kept the space warm enough to work through the cold winter, while a pallet-and-plywood platform gave us a safe work area and a path to move our mini skid steer inside the grotto.



In the frozen winter cold, the team cuts both horizontally and vertically to shape a rock that will cantilever over the pool's edge.

the rain curtain on the grotto's opposite side.

From the outset, I knew this build would test our creativity, endurance and ability to adapt—and the challenges were extreme. The constraints of working in ice, sleet and snow were demanding, as were the challenges of curing concrete and keeping pipes, equipment and materials from freezing.

Adding to the complexity, the deck's concrete framework had been poured before our involvement, meaning we had to cut every rock to fit around it rather than setting stone first and leaving voids for concrete after. The slide was already in place when we arrived, so every stone had to be cut and set without damaging the fiberglass structure.

Navigating Tight Quarters

In our business, planning demands creative problem solving. Issues around access can make or break progress, and this was one of those moments.

Access to the job site was restricted by the spiral staircase. Concrete pillars framed the deck and the pool's linear footprint along the back of the house. With no way to bring in full-sized machines, we relied on a crane to position heavy stone and a mini skid steer to transport materials. Meanwhile, contractors installed bluestone patios, so staging and sequencing became coordination with construction.

To move efficiently around the space, we placed pallets inside the sunken pool and created a temporary drivable surface for the skid steer. That adjustment allowed us to waterproof the shell and safely set the rain curtain framework.

We worked with Wisconsin Lannon Stone for this project. During the selection process, each stone was evaluated for stability, load-bearing capacity and ability to strengthen the grotto's framework, as well as for its rugged texture and warm tones.

This stone choice was critical for structural integrity, water flow, sound and weatherization. Wisconsin Lannon Stone, a dolomite limestone, is valued for its durability and resistance to erosion. It has consistent density that makes it reliable under load, while its color and texture bring dimension to the build.

The design required every stone to be cut and set with precision. During what became a winter with below-average temperatures, each stone had to be handled in freezing conditions. Even a slight misplacement could disrupt the water's flow and undermine the natural effect of the waterfall.

Adapting to Winter Realities

We set up a heated storage facility on-site to protect our hoses and tools. That small shelter was essential for keeping the project moving. Without it, every cold snap could have stalled us for days. Mechanicals were similarly protected, including with tarp to provide shelter from winds and freezing rain.

There's always a rhythm to stonework: cut, place, step back and assess. Winter has a different rhythm. Water freezes. Equipment fails. Fingers go numb after a few minutes without gloves. At one point, the main grotto stone fractured after being placed, forcing us to remove and source a replacement—no small task in frozen ground.

Working in winter tested our patience and resilience. The rhythm of our work was disrupted by frozen ground, icy surfaces and constant safety checks. Through it all, our team learned to work with the cold instead of against it and that mindset made all the difference.

Instead of resenting the conditions, we leaned into them, pacing ourselves and celebrating progress one boulder at a time. This was not about rushing, but about precision. Each week brought visible change.

Building a Backyard Escape

As the grotto took shape, the backyard escape came into focus. The Olympic-size swimming pool stretched out in front. The spiral staircase wound its way to the slide and elevated deck. Three hot tubs provided distinct experiences.

From the pool, the grotto and waterfall offered ambient sound and a dramatic view. From inside the sunken pool, the space became a serene retreat veiled by the rain curtain.

The project was on a fast track for completion, and that pressure shaped everything we did. If we hadn't worked through winter, we would not have finished on the client's deadline. By March, the final boulders were nearly in place. The structure was sound and the waterfall's framework was ready. All that remained was finishing work and fine-tuning the water elements.

Building a grotto is one thing. Making it feel natural is another. Water does not lie. It reveals every imperfection in grade, slope and placement. Our goal was to create a flow that looked effortless and timeless, as though the grotto had always been there.

In the early spring, rocks needed adjustment to perfect water flow, so we cut, shifted and reset stone until water cascaded smoothly. The process was meticulous but rewarding. When it came together, ambient sound and movement created a luxury feel that transformed the space.

Fine-tuning the rain curtain added complexity. Too much flow becomes a torrent. Too little, and the effect disappears. We calibrated carefully until the rain curtain created privacy and mystery without overwhelming the sunken pool.



The pool builder had already finished the stone trim around the pool and spa when we got the call to handle the grotto install—a project we'd originally helped design. From that point on, we were fighting snow, wind and freezing temperatures to get it done.



Behind the scenes, an entire wall of pumps, filters and heaters powers the grotto's massive waterfall system—keeping water clean, moving and ready to enjoy.



A large span rock is placed on the back side of the grotto. Freezing temperatures often forced the team to dry-stack stones and later take them apart to reset with mortar once conditions improved.



Even then, we couldn't test the full system until the pool was plastered, filled and running. By the time water flowed, landscaping crews had begun closing off access, which meant we couldn't use our crane or other large equipment. Adjustments had to be made by hand in tight quarters.

Working side by side with our partners at Platinum Pool, we ensured our features blended seamlessly with theirs and within the site's landscape. Collaboration is what makes projects like this possible—and fun. Even in winter.

The Finished Escape

By mid-spring, the grotto was finished, framed in stone that mirrored the home and felt natural in the surrounding landscape. Every vantage point delivered something new—drama, luxury, intimacy and playfulness—the essence of a backyard escape.

For the clients, the grotto was a vision that started months earlier. For our team, it was proof of what can be achieved when determination meets collaboration. We created more than a backyard water feature. We created an environment, an experience and a lasting memory.

Projects like this affirm why I do what I do. Water transforms space. It turns a backyard into an escape, stone into a sculpture and challenge into an accomplishment. When the client walked the site and smiled, every cold morning and frozen late night felt worth it.

Lessons from Winter

As pond professionals, we often face conditions that test our limits. Whether working


Final grotto with running waterfall.

in heat, cold, rain or logistical puzzles, we adapt. In adapting, we grow. This project reminded me that some of the best outcomes come not in spite of challenges but because of them.

Building in winter is not for everyone, and it's not always advisable. But when conditions require it and the team is prepared, it can be done—and done well. The keys are preparation, protection and perspective.

Preparation means planning every step, from equipment and storage to materials and staging. Protection means safeguarding tools, hoses and people from the cold. Perspective means embracing the conditions instead of fighting them.

Winter work also highlights the importance of teamwork, especially in tight spaces. You discover rhythms and efficiencies that might otherwise go unnoticed. Without collaboration, the dedication of our crew and the patience of our client, this project would not have come to fruition.

Now that the build is behind us, I often look back on those long winter days with a mix of relief and pride. Relief that we persevered and pride in the final product. The Palos Park grotto is more than stone and water. It's a testament to resilience, artistry and the belief that beauty can be built in any season.

About the Author



Larry Carnes is the president of Reflections Water Gardens in West Dundee, Illinois. Larry began his career as a student of art and developed an interest in landscaping. He worked for several companies, gaining knowledge in tree care, patio design and installation and landscape architecture. He renders concepts for his clients that are pieces of art as much as they are working designs. After assisting a pond builder in creating a unique in-ground pond/pool for his family, Larry's landscaping interest turned to water features. Larry has taken Genesis 3 courses with Anthony Archer-Wills, learning to design and create natural-looking ponds and water features. Reflections Water Gardens focuses on high-end residential and commercial projects with naturalistic watershaping.

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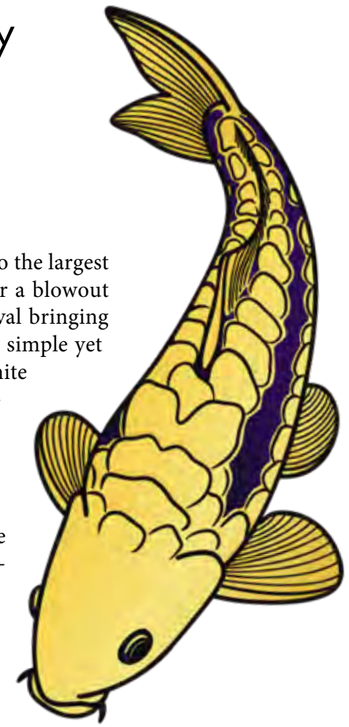
KOI FEST 2025

A Celebration of Koi and Community Four Years in the Making

by Lauren Nolan,
Publisher of POND Trade Magazine

Now in its fourth year, Koi Fest has grown from a simple idea into the largest koi event in the United States. What began as Fitz's vision for a blowout end-of-season sale has transformed into a one-of-a-kind festival bringing together every corner of the koi and pond community. His dream was simple yet ambitious: take all the most exciting elements of the koi world and unite them in one place for a weekend of discovery, connection, and celebration.

At Koi Fest, guests can do much more than shop for some of the highest-quality Japanese koi available in America. The event features a Japanese-inspired koi auction, mirroring the excitement of auctions in Niigata, as well as the Tri-State ZNA Koi Show, showcasing some of the most spectacular fish in the world. To ensure the event is fun for everyone, Fitz's Fish Ponds (FFP) has expanded the festival each year with family-friendly activities including a kids' play area, face painting, and even a Unity Bank–sponsored hot air balloon ride.









Scale and Atmosphere

Koi Fest 2025 took place on August 23rd in Milford, NJ, at the FFP Farm. Throughout the year, the farm can be visited by appointment only, but FFP opens their doors for Koi Fest one weekend each year. Far more than just koi, it was a celebration of passion and global koi culture. The event brought together over 100 staff members who worked tirelessly behind the scenes, while more than 1,500 guests traveled from across the country and around the world to attend. The scale of the event was unprecedented, growing an estimated 25 percent larger than the previous year. Gates opened early to handle the overwhelming crowds, and by 9 a.m. over 100 people were already lined up to be among the first to experience the festival.

This year raised the bar once again with 33 exciting giveaways, including koi, pond products, gift cards, merchandise, and the most coveted prize of them all — a free koi buying trip to Japan. It's an event that connects hobbyists and DIY pond lovers with contractors, retailers, judges, Japanese breeders, and koi experts from across the globe, filling the farm with energy and excitement.

A Night of Special Access

The excitement began Friday evening with Special Access Night, a private ticketed event that gave koi lovers a more intimate connection to the festival. For $200, attendees received a guided tour of the Milford, NJ koi farm, home to one of the most impressive collections of Japanese koi in the country. The evening concluded with the Special Access Welcome Dinner, which featured an unforgettable culinary performance by Tokyo Hibachi and SEP Events. Guests dined on sushi and hibachi served from a dragon-themed grill and sushi display, a stunning centerpiece that honored this year's Aragoke theme. The experience blended culture, cuisine, and koi passion, setting the perfect stage for the weekend ahead.























Main Day Highlights

On Saturday, the festival grounds erupted with activity. Thousands of koi were offered for sale, ranging from small tosai to massive champions, and the exclusive koi auction created a rush of excitement as collectors bid on high-value fish. Normally selling for $5,000 to $8,000, many koi were purchased for $2,000 to $3,000, drawing serious buyers eager to secure once-in-a-lifetime deals.

In addition, over $10,000 worth of koi products and pond accessories were given away during the day, culminating in the announcement of the annual free koi buying trip to Japan, a tradition that has become one of Koi Fest's most anticipated moments. Beyond koi, the festival offered an atmosphere that celebrated community as much as it did fish. Guests enjoyed local food and wine, including a tasting by Gary Vee's father's business, Wine Library, while exploring an expansive vendor village. Food trucks such as 22 West, Tia B's Street Tacos, Q-Crew BBQ, and Q-Bros Ice Cream & Italian Ice kept the crowds fueled, while dozens of vendors including Evolution Aqua, Koi Trips USA, Microbe Lift, Atlantic Oase, Mid-Atlantic Koi Club, Maple Leaf Bonsai, Easy Pro, and FFP Aquariums & Aquascaping gave hobbyists the chance to discover the latest products and services.

Adding celebrity energy to the day, Adam Richman, host of Man vs. Food, served as MC for the event. Richman announced giveaways, interacted with the crowd, and gave glowing reviews of the food vendors, praising the flavors that made Koi Fest not only a koi lover's paradise but also a culinary adventure. Legendary breeders such as Shigeru Mano of Dainichi Koi Farm, Shuki Narita of Narita Koi Farm, and Masaru Saito of Shintaro Koi Farm joined industry leaders like Tim Waddington, Yvo DeWal, and Mark McKinney, sharing their expertise with the crowd. Live music by The Brandywine Poets carried the event through the afternoon, while families enjoyed children's activities, raffles, and the spectacle of the koi auction.

Tri State ZNA Koi Show

Beyond sales and auctions, another highlight of the event was the Tri-State ZNA Koi Show. This prestigious competition, organized by the Tri-State chapter of ZNA in conjunction with Fitz's Fish Ponds, and sponsored by Hikari, brought together an extraordinary lineup of koi that rivaled those seen at major international shows. Rows of blue show vats lined the festival grounds, each holding koi that represented years of dedication, breeding, and artistry. Judges from around the world evaluated fish based on body conformation, skin quality, color depth, and pattern balance — the highest standards in the hobby.

The show featured some of the best koi ever seen in the U.S., including the All American Koi Show Grand Champion and the 90-bu champion from the All Japan Koi Show. Spectators crowded around vats, pointing out subtle refinements in skin luster and the elegance of swimming posture, while newcomers marveled at the sheer size and beauty of living jewels exceeding 30 inches. The koi show elevated the festival from a community gathering to a stage where serious collectors and breeders could compete for prestige and recognition.

Koi Fest Weekend Concludes in Style

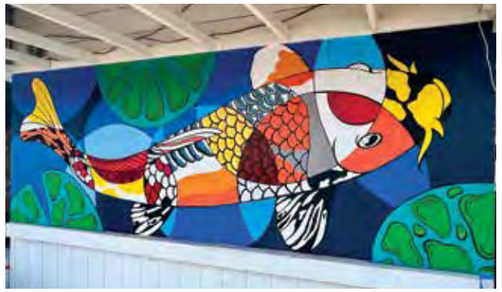
When the public event wrapped up at 4 p.m., the Fitz's Fish Ponds team shifted gears with remarkable efficiency. In less than an hour, the festival grounds were transformed into an elegant banquet space for the Tri-State ZNA Koi Show Banquet. The evening featured passed appetizers, glowing tent lights, and a festive yet reverent atmosphere as koi awards were presented. Among the evening's highlights were the top honors of the 13th Annual Tri-State ZNA Koi Show, where Herbert Fritch's striking Showa over 30 inches was crowned Grand Champion A, and Andrew Sandler's stunning Kinginrin B of the same size class earned Grand Champion B. Guests applauded the artistry and dedication behind each of these remarkable koi, celebrating the exceptional craftsmanship and passion that define the world of koi keeping and closing the weekend on a truly high note.

Powered by Community and Sponsors

The success of Koi Fest 2025 was made possible by the tremendous support of its sponsors. Atlantic Oase led as Platinum Sponsor, while Gold Sponsors included Unity Bank, Microbe Lift, Evolution Aqua USA, Profi Drum USA, and Koi Trips













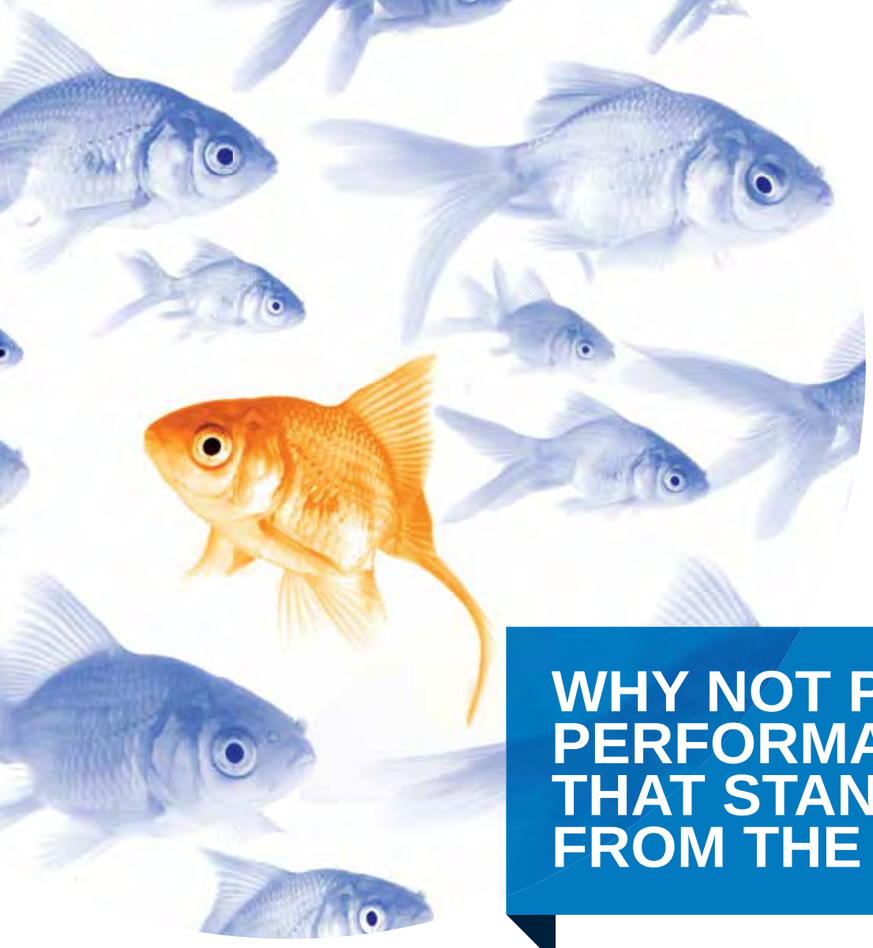












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Looking Ahead to 2026

Attendees praised Koi Fest 2025 for the quality of koi and the sense of community and global culture it fosters. "Just when you think it can't get bigger or better, Fitz's Fish Ponds does it again," remarked Eric Triplett, also known as The Pond Digger.

As the koi world looks ahead to the fifth anniversary of Koi Fest in 2026, anticipation is already building. If 2025 is any indication, the milestone celebration promises to be larger, more dynamic, and filled with surprises that will continue to make Koi Fest the premier koi event in America.

Koi Fest is more than koi. It is passion, community, and a living celebration of global koi culture.



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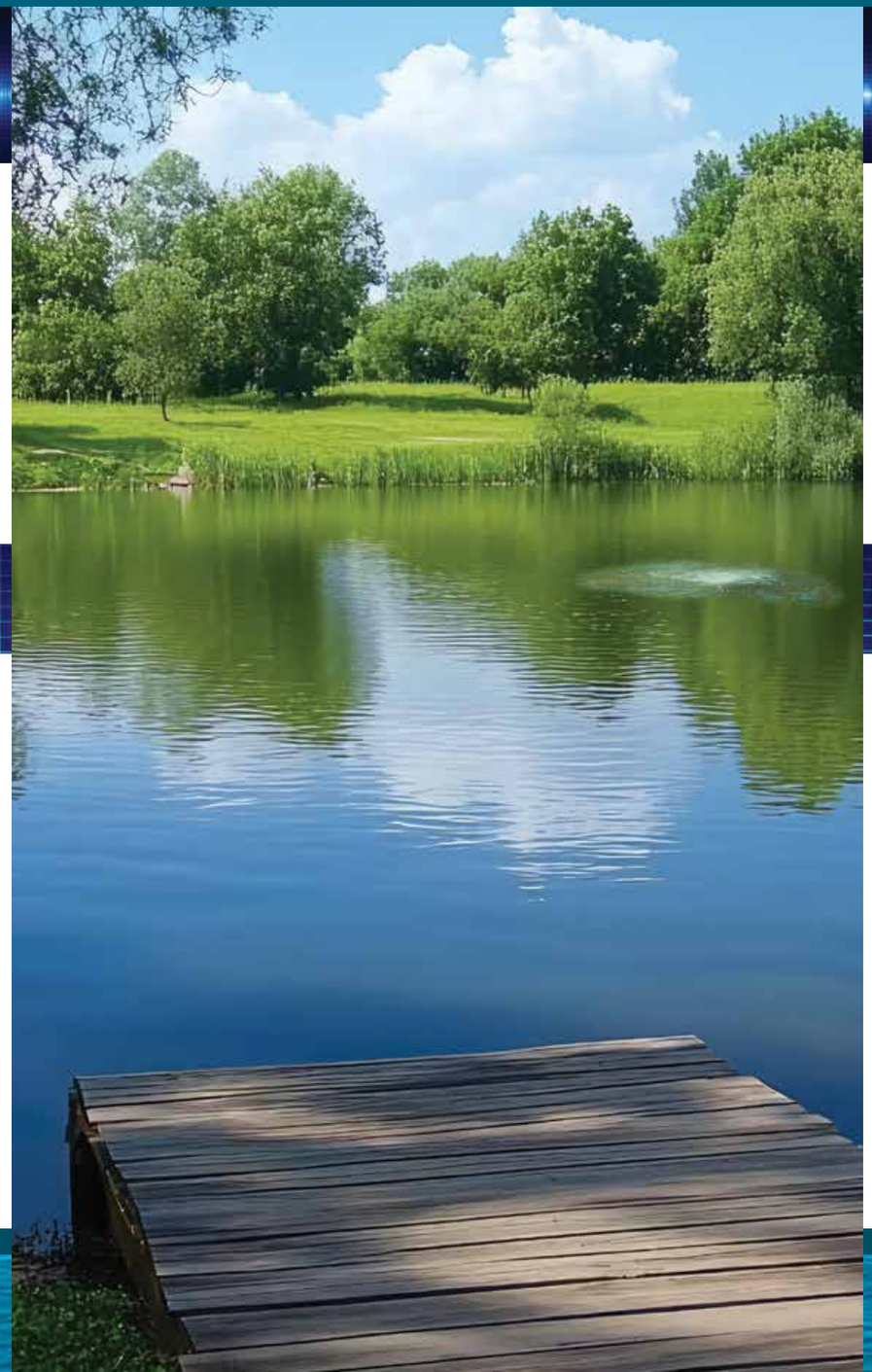
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A Backyard Oasis Like No Other

by Brent Bivona,
Sunrise Aquatics

When the client first approached us, they had one dream: a recreational pond that felt less like a pool and more like a living, breathing aquatic retreat. Not just water in the backyard, but an experience. They wanted a place to relax, recharge, and share a lifestyle built around the beauty of nature.

At the heart of their vision was family. A place where their grandchildren could step into a mini paradise, splashing in clear water, exploring edges alive with plants, and making the kind of memories that stick for a lifetime. But it wasn't only about family. They also wanted a space for entertaining, a natural gathering place that would draw people in, whether for quiet evenings under the stars or lively weekends with friends.

What began as a dream soon unfolded into a vision beyond the page and Vegas East was born. We worked closely with the architect, Professional Engineering Group, as well as the homeowner to plan and design a retreat style backyard that included a recreational pond that balances beauty, function, and fun. Our team was able to bring the designs on the page to life, resulting in a place where water, stone, and plants all come together to create something far greater than the sum of its parts. We saw the chance to create not just a pond, but a destination, an oasis where time slows and every detail feels deliberate.

Designing the Dream

The finished design stretches an impressive 80' by 100' feet, plunging 10.5' feet at its deepest point, a scale that invites both awe and exploration. At its heart, a 30' by 40' foot wetland filter breathes life into the water, keeping it crystal clear while doubling as a lush backdrop of native plantings. On the far side, a 16' by 20' foot intake bay works quietly behind the scenes, maintaining balance without breaking the spell of serenity. Hidden beneath the surface, a 5' by 8' foot swim cave offers a sense of adventure, where the bold can dive below to test their underwater skills.



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Regulatory Roadblocks and Weather Setbacks

As with many projects, phase 1 was determining the layout of the pond and mass excavation. For a project this size, this is no small feat. Phase 2 came to a halt when the town shut down the project for two months due to concerns over a non-permanent structure and a retaining wall used for construction parking. This triggered additional inspections and raised unrelated issues, such as silt fencing, which ultimately resulted in a Stop Work Order.

The shutdown caused major logistical challenges. Months of planning were derailed, the pond excavation was left exposed, and heavy rains led to cave-ins, creating a serious mess on site. To make matters worse, this delay occurred just before our out-of-town collaboration crew was scheduled to arrive, forcing them to reschedule their entire season. Ultimately, we lost two months of progress leading up to Thanksgiving, shut down again until April, and had to complete the remainder of the project under pressure—finishing just before July 4th.

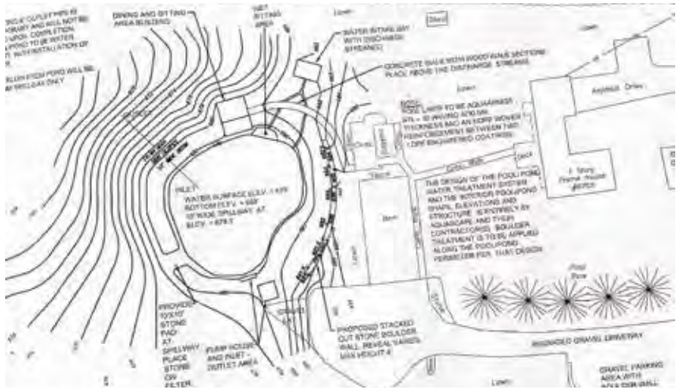
Collaboration at Its Core

A project of this scale came with challenges, but that's where the magic happened. From day one, we knew this build required more than muscle—it called for collaboration. By teaming up with fellow Certified Aquascape Contractors, we combined decades of craftsmanship, creativity, and problem-solving grit.

The pond team united Sunrise Aquatics, Aqua-Springs of Texas, and 4D Exteriorscapes, while Real Rock delivered hardscape precision. Together, we created a jobsite that was as seamless as it was fun. Sunrise, 4D and Aqua-Springs brought their expertise in design and filtration, stream and waterfall artistry, wetlands and intake bays. We all were able to learn unique hacks from each other throughout this process. Damian, the human pond calculator, from 4D is a numbers geek that earned the name "Numbers" or "Numbs" for short. Real Rock brought their expertise in hardscapes and stonework and contributed with the stone stacked walls, fire pits and fabricating the unique grotto.

Powerhouse Performance

Balancing fun and function on a pond of this scale demanded precision at every step. Achieving crystal-clear water while carving







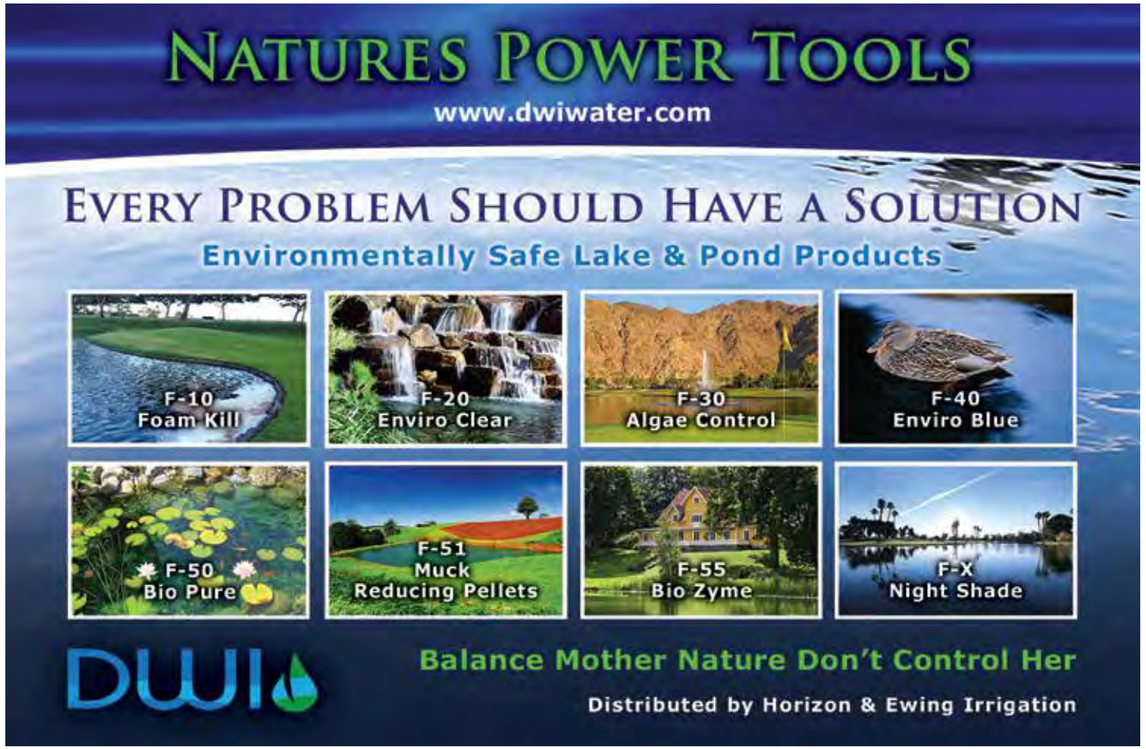




(Top) Phase 1, the arrchitect's final design. - (Center) Phase 2, the pond design sketch by Brent Bivona. - (Bottom) A peek into what lies beneath the surface of the pond. Here you can see the glass viewing window, sitting ledge, stairs and grotto.



Imagine seeing this stunning koi collection through the glass window in the sunken seating area.





Empty landscape before the project began.

out dedicated recreational zones wasn't just a challenge, it was an engineering art form. The wetland filter and intake bay had to be seamlessly integrated without choking flow, a puzzle solved through in-field tweaks and custom adjustments.

From the architect's vision to the decades of hands-on expertise from our team, the coordination with Superior Plumbing Service, and direct collaboration with the Aquascape Tech Department, the solution came together in the form of a powerhouse pumphouse. Outfitted with five 18,000-gph custom external Aquascape pumps feeding the wetland and waterfall wall, plus two 21,300-gph pumps driving the jets to the intake bay, the system ensures flawless circulation, balanced flow and water clarity that is practically transparent.

Engineering a Flow

Four pumps drive more than 40,000 gallons per hour down a stream into a natural boulder split waterfall. From there, the water cascades over a dramatic dive rock and a scalloped grotto with stepping stones.

The design also includes spaces for gathering and relaxation. A Timber Frame Inc. custom design covers the sunken seating area with a window into the pond connecting visitors to the aquatic life below, while an in-pond seating zone framed by a stacked stone waterfall wall immerses guests in the sights and sounds of flowing water. One of the owner's favorite ways to enjoy the pond is to settle into this area with a cigar and his favorite beverage.

A Living Showcase

The pond's living jewels bring the Vegas East property to life. 44 imported Japanese koi, hand-selected by SideKoi, form the heart of the ecosystem. These vibrant fish are the owners' true pride and joy, swimming beneath tropical and hardy waterlilies and a rich selection of marginals. Water Becomes a Garden provided expertise







(Center) The fire pit acts as inviting space next to the pond.
(Bottom) The beautifully crafted timber frame covered seating area, created by Jeremy Brown Masons and Timber Frame Inc.

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The mini wetland filtration waterfall spills over so swimmers can relax on the submerged bench and interact with the koi.

in the artistry of plant selection and design.

Carefully positioned lighting highlights the grotto, swim cave, and seating areas, while paver path lights and accent fixtures make the pond glow both day and night.

An Experience, Not Just a Pond

The name "Vegas East", which was coined by the homeowner, captures the essence of this space perfectly—a nod to the glamour and energy of Las Vegas, but reimagined with refinement and ease. It's a place where elegance meets entertainment, where guests aren't just visitors, they're part of an experience.

Here, sophistication is effortless. Evenings might begin with a casual gathering after the golf league, the warm glow of fire pits welcoming friends as music drifts through the air. The poker table comes out for the home league, a stylish nod to classic Vegas nights, yet tempered by the comfort of a private retreat. Grills fire up for weekend cookouts, conversations flow, and laughter echoes across the water as koi glide beneath.

Vegas East isn't about spectacle—it's about ambiance, connection, and curated fun. Every element, from seating areas to fire features, from the pond's reflection to the carefully designed lighting, sets the stage for moments that are memorable without being ostentatious. It's a retreat where luxury is lived, not flaunted, and where entertaining friends feels as natural as relaxing with a cigar and a favorite drink, the night stretching on in perfect rhythm.

Vegas East isn't just a pond—it's an experience. Every detail, from waterfalls and jets to koi and plantings, was designed to maximize beauty, function, and enjoyment. This project proves that with vision, collaboration, and technical expertise, a backyard can be transformed into an aquatic paradise.





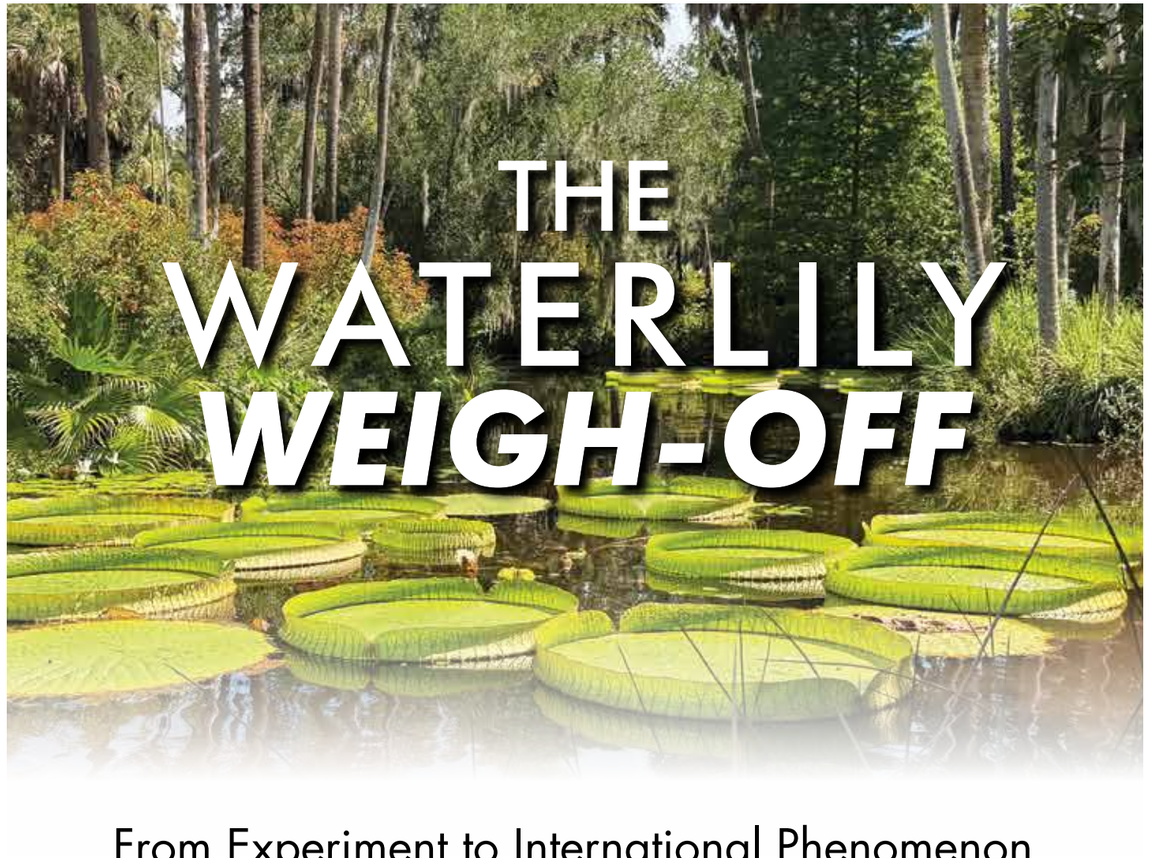


The serene and beautiful photos were all taken by Ben Secor Photography capturing the essence of Vegas East.

About the Author



Brent Bivona is the owner of Sunrise Aquatics, where he designs and builds custom water features that bring nature to life in backyards and public spaces. As a Certified Aquascape Contractor and Top Frog award recipient, Brent is recognized for his creativity, craftsmanship, and dedication to sustainable, ecosystem-based water features. With a passion for inspiring people to connect with water and wildlife, he has become a trusted leader in the pond industry.



THE WATERLILY *WEIGH-OFF*

From Experiment to International Phenomenon

by Erin Bird,
Interim Director of Marketing & Social Responsibility,
Denver Botanic Gardens

What started as a playful social media experiment at Denver Botanic Gardens has now blossomed into an international competition that captures the imagination of plant lovers around the world. The Waterlily Weigh-Off—our annual contest to test the buoyant strength of giant Victoria waterlily leaves wrapped up its third official year this August with record participation, viral social media engagement, and some truly astonishing results.

How It Began

The seed for this contest was planted back in 2021, when our team was brainstorming ways to keep audiences engaged during the pandemic. Vanessa, one of our learning engagement specialists also known as, "The Nerdy Naturalist," suggested a video experiment: let's see how much weight our Victoria waterlily leaves can hold.



Vanessa Callahan shows the underside of a Victoria waterlily leaf, revealing the spikes and wide air-filled veins that cut up competing plants and keep it afloat.

That summer, we stacked sandbags on the platter-like leaves and were astonished to reach 89 pounds—the most we've ever recorded at Denver Botanic Gardens. What began as an educational video on plant science quickly revealed itself as something bigger.

The following year, we teamed up with the New York Botanical Garden for a friendly head-to-head competition. Soon, other gardens joined in. By 2023, the weigh-off had grown into a collaborative effort with 14 participating institutions, including entries from England and Scotland. The creativity and community sparked something we hadn't anticipated: comparisons to the Super Bowl, the Olympics, and even the beloved "Fat Bear Week" run by U.S. National Parks.

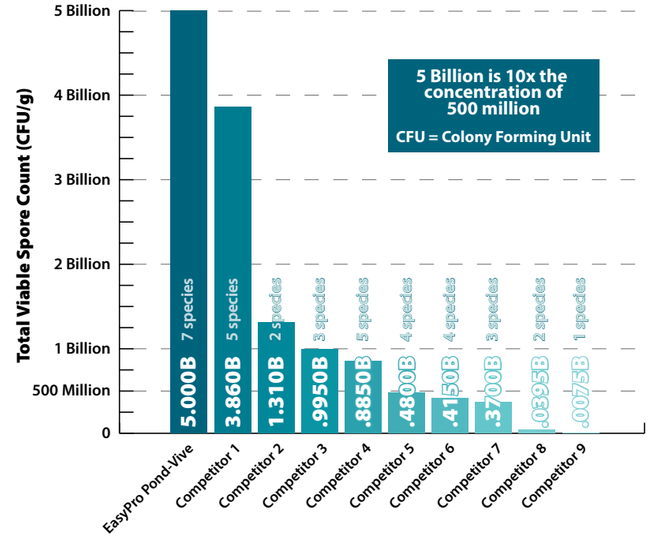
Going Global

Fast forward to 2025, and the weigh-off has become a true international spectacle. This year's contest, held August 18–24, drew 49 participants representing 47 public gardens

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(Left) Measuring the diameter of the waterlily leaf before testing its' weight. (Right) Rick Levy, Vanessa Callahan and Davis Benson place weights on the waterlily leaf during the Weigh-Off filming.

and two U.S. zoos across nine countries. Competitors showcased their Victoria amazonica, V. cruziana, and Victoria 'Longwood Hybrid' leaves, which can span up to 10 feet in diameter and, thanks to their ribbed undersides and structural engineering, support remarkable weight.

The 2025 champion, Bok Tower Gardens of Florida, set a new record when their lily leaf supported 183 pounds (83 kg). Just behind them was Missouri Botanical Garden—the reigning 2024 champion—with 182 pounds, and Huntsville Botanical Garden in third with 176 pounds. Missouri proudly passed along the official trophy, which has become a cherished symbol of waterlily supremacy.

"We are beyond thrilled that our very first submission to the Waterlily Weigh-Off was crowned champion. This incredible accomplishment reflects the dedication and collaboration of our Horticulture, Education, and Communications teams, and celebrates the beauty and wonder of the Amazon Waterlilies that delight our visitors every summer," said Brendan Huggins, Director of Horticulture at Bok Tower. "We are also very appreciative of Denver's coordination and execution of the contest!"

More Than Just Numbers

While the competition is built on pounds and kilograms, the true heart of the Waterlily Weigh-Off lies in creativity, collaboration, and education. This year's entries proved that storytelling is just as important as science. Instead of simple sandbags, gardens leaned into regional culture and humor: Brooklyn Botanic Garden stacked cheesecake, Florida's Bok Tower used sacks of oranges, and others balanced pizzas, beers, or toy figurines.











Bok Tower Gardens located in Florida captures their triumphs and tribulations while participating in the Waterlily Weigh Off. They took home the championship with their waterlily holding 183 lb. / 83 kg.





Even gardens without giant Victorias joined in through our "Featherweight Bracket." These entries featured small waterlilies with whimsical loads like Lego figurines, gummy bears, or ceramic frogs. San Diego Botanic Garden's videos in particular delighted viewers, reminding us that participation is about fun and creativity as much as size.

Viral Momentum

The weigh-off has also become a social media sensation. Videos of the contest have gone viral on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, drawing in audiences far beyond the horticulture world. In fact, TikTok itself created a montage this year, featuring highlights from participants and fans. The competition has introduced millions of people—many of them young and new to plants—to the fascinating world of aquatic botany.

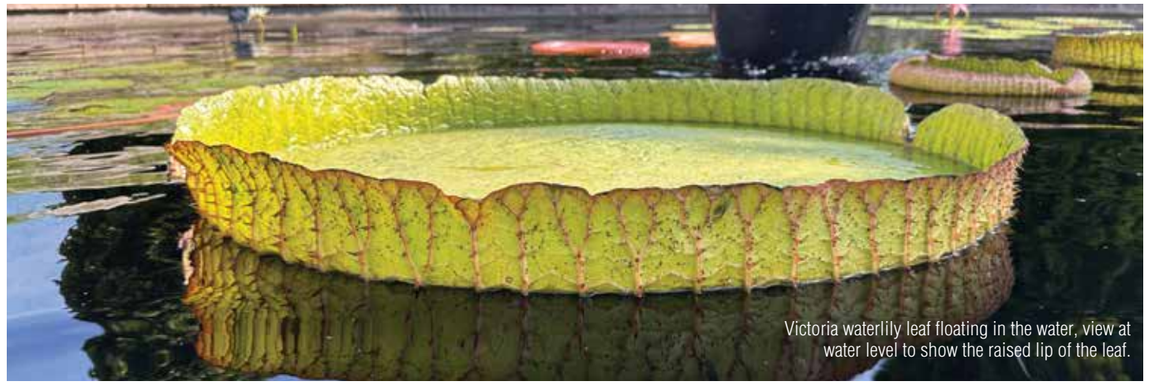
And that's the real victory: sparking curiosity about plants. By demonstrating the natural engineering of waterlily leaves—their buoyant veins, air pockets, and protective spines—we sneak in a science lesson while keeping things entertaining.

Collaboration and Growth

Another benefit has been the collaboration among public gardens. Many participants are smaller institutions with limited social media



Denver Botanic Gardens created the trophy that says Waterlily Heavy Weight Champion. It was mailed to the 2024 winner (Missouri Botanical Garden) and they mailed it to the 2025 winner (Bok Tower Gardens).



Victoria waterlily leaf floating in the water, view at water level to show the raised lip of the leaf.

reach, and the weigh-off has given them a platform to shine. The cross-promotion and sense of community have been invaluable.

While originally designed for public gardens, zoos, and museums, private growers have shown interest too. As the weigh-off grows, we may explore additional divisions to keep the spirit inclusive while honoring its roots in museum and garden collaboration.

Looking Ahead

The Waterlily Weigh-Off has grown from a quirky idea to a beloved annual tradition that unites institutions, entertains the public, and educates millions about aquatic plants. With every entry, from record-breaking leaves to featherweight spoofs, the competition continues to spread joy, spark wonder, and highlight the resilience and beauty of these extraordinary plants.

As we look to 2026, one thing is certain: the Waterlily Weigh-Off has only just begun to make waves.



Scan to see the complete list of the **Waterlily Weigh-Off** 2025 Participants

About the Author



Erin Bird has worked at Denver Botanic Gardens for 12 years and is the Interim Director of Marketing during a CEO transition. She champions the Gardens' external storytelling and community programs that break down access barriers by managing the team that oversees advertising, media relations, social media, graphic design, website and community engagement. Bird is an accomplished communications leader utilizing strong skills in publicity, crisis management, writing, editing and public speaking to promote museums and the important work they do. Prior to working at the Gardens, she managed media relations at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and was a marketing event specialist at the flagship Marshall Field's Department Store (now Macy's) in Chicago. She has presented at multiple American Public Gardens Association conferences and has served on boards focused on the arts: the Colorado Committee for the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Metropolitan State University's Center for Visual Art and the Art District on Santa Fe in Denver.

The Featherweight Bracket: Small Lilies, Big Laughs

Not every garden has a giant Victoria waterlily, but that doesn't mean they can't join the fun. Enter the Featherweight Bracket—a playful division of the Waterlily Weigh-Off where smaller lilies take center stage. These petite contenders, with leaves just a few inches across, may not hold a person (or even a pumpkin), but they sure know how to entertain.

This year's featherweights delivered creativity in spades:

- San Diego Botanic Garden delighted viewers with spoof-style videos, balancing miniature objects and crafting hilarious storylines.
- Conservatory of Flowers stacked two ceramic frogs onto their leaf, proving style matters as much as scale.
- The Morton Arboretum joined in with 12 toy frogs, a quirky nod to lily pad lore.
- UCLA Mathias Botanical Garden weighed in with perhaps the tiniest entry of all—one gummy bear (0.007 lb. / 0.003 kg)!

San Diego Botanic Garden described their approach this way:

"We first joined the Waterlily Weigh Off in 2024 after being invited by Denver Botanic Gardens. They knew we didn't have the massive lilies in our collection, but encouraged us to get creative with our smaller varieties—and we were up for the challenge! When the opportunity came around again this year, we knew we had to dive in. With the brilliant script writing talents of Joe DeWolf from our Science and Conservation team, and the editing expertise of our partners at Petrucci Marketing, we wanted to create a playful storyline to keep viewers entertained while acknowledging that we don't exactly have a shot at winning. This challenge has become one of our favorites, thanks to the fun, creativity, and camaraderie shared among participating gardens from around the world."

That sense of camaraderie is what keeps the Featherweight Bracket thriving. Though these entries can't rival the 183-pound leaf that topped this year's scale, they capture something equally important—the joy of participation. By leaning into humor and imagination, the bracket ensures that even the smallest lily has a chance to make a big splash, proving that the contest is as much about creativity and community as it is about sheer size.

















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AQUASCAPING UNVEILED



The Indoor Hobby That Mirrors Pond Design

by Johnathon Butkus,
Atlantic Oase Midwest Regional Sales Manager

What if I told you the satisfaction of designing a functional pond, placing rockwork, pruning plants and feeding your fish need not diminish with the inevitable change of seasons? What if I also told you there is a hobby so comparable in core principles to ponds and water gardens that the similarities are uncanny, with the main difference being the size and dimension of your project? If that piqued your interest, then aquascaping an aquarium may be a perfect fit for your next winter project.

The aquarium hobby boasts a long history, similar to water gardening, which can be traced back to the Victorian era of the 1800s and beyond. After decades of advancement in livestock husbandry, availability, product development and aquarium-keeping communities and culture, today's aquariums are more accessible than ever. With these advancements,







(Right:) Stainless steel framed tanks were commonplace in the 1900s until the late 70s when silicone sealant became commonly available along with plastic frames. Scape by author. - (Left) "The Humbling River" by Chantz Cramer. Instagram: chantz_the_scaper.

it's no surprise that the public perception of an everyday aquarium being "just" a glass box with fish, a few plants, colored gravel and maybe a decorative mermaid or "Diver Dan" ornament is evolving into various styles of aquariums focused on one or more aesthetic or functional goals inspired by nature.

The Artistry of Aquascaping

In simplest terms, aquascaping is the art and practice of intentional aquarium design. Aquascapers use any combination of rock, wood, aquatic plants or other natural elements, such as dried botanicals, to create lush aquatic garden landscapes or biotopes that mimic specific real-life aquatic habitats down to the finest detail.

Artistic principles such as depth, contrast, proportion, balance, scale, form and texture all come into play when creating an aesthetically pleasing aquascape. For example, you might place large stones up front, then slightly smaller stones descending in size toward the back of the aquarium to create a sense of depth and scale. Sloping substrate higher in the back helps force perspective and avoid a flat look.

Picking two plant species of contrasting colors or leaf shapes can create visual interest. Using the rule of thirds can help balance a layout and prevent too many focal points that distract from the details. Think of these more as tools than rules, and remember: rules are made to be broken. Let your creativity flow, play and experiment as you scape.

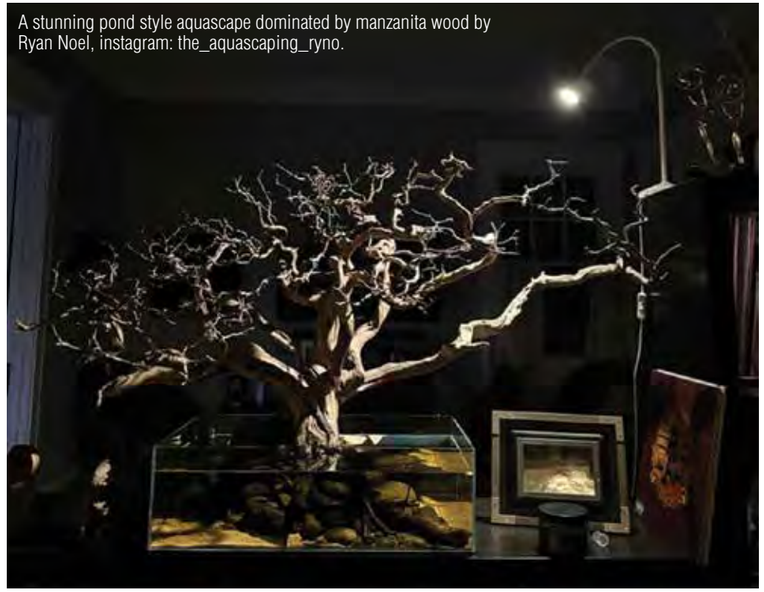
Over the years, many aquascaping styles have developed. Dutch-style aquascapes, one of the first dating back to the early 1900s, are defined and judged by rules of plant arrangement, species selection, color contrast, husbandry and manicured maintenance. Hardscape elements take a back seat as organization and vivid plant growth dominate.

In contrast, the Nature Aquarium style was pioneered by the late Takashi Amano and is based on creating naturalistic landscapes underwater. Inspiration might come from a panoramic mountain range or a forest clearing with fallen tree trunks covered in moss. These aquascapes mimic not just the visual likeness but also the feeling and story behind the source of inspiration—all within a glass box.

Biotope aquariums prioritize accuracy when depicting a specific habitat. This might include recreating a section of Brazil's Pantanal wetlands with



"Dutch Envision" by Scott Miller.



A stunning pond style aquascape dominated by manzanita wood by Ryan Noel, instagram: the_aquascaping_ryno.



A saltwater aquascape utilizing macroalgae as the marine substitute for aquatic plants. Instagram: JohnathonButkusMedia

native plants and fish, or mimicking the blackwater habitat of the neon tetra with thin driftwood, dense leaf litter and tannin-stained water.

For a more literal crossover from ponds to aquariums, you might try a pond-style aquascape. This uses shallow aquarium dimensions to display emersed plant growth and protruding hardscape, much like a backyard pond rising above its basin.

Other styles include Jungle, Diorama, Iwagumi, Brazilian and more. While these styles and principles provide guidelines, don't get lost in labels. Experiment freely—mistakes and persistence are the recipe for growth. With time, you'll learn to merge design concepts with your personal taste to create unique aquascapes of your own.





Already hoarding rocks? What's a few more piles anyways? A variety of textures, shapes and colors in available hardscape options mean endless possibilities.

Hardscape: Rocks and Wood

One of the most obvious parallels to ponds is the use of hardscape materials like stone and driftwood. Aquarium stores stock a wide range of rock, including dragon (Ohko) stone, Seiryu stone, lava rock, Hakkai stone, river stone, petrified wood and elephant stone. Each type has unique geology and aesthetic qualities. Just as with pond rockwork, aquascaping stones are chosen for color, contrast, texture and character to harmonize with the overall layout.



Different types of driftwood are also widely used—either as the sole hardscape material or in combination with stone. Shaping or breaking hardscape into smaller detail pieces may be necessary to create scale or achieve desired forms. Tools such as chisels, saws, rasps or Dremels can alter stone and wood. Cyanoacrylate glue and curing methods can seamlessly bond materials. (Wear gloves and work safely—cyanoacrylate is messy and no fun to peel off your hands later!)

Biology and Equipment

Just as koi waste, uneaten food and solids in ponds generate nutrients like ammonia, aquariums face the same challenges. With most aquariums holding less than 100 gallons, waste accumulates quickly, and robust filtration is essential.

Aquarium filters—whether hang-on-back, internal, sump or canister—combine mechanical, chemical and biological filtration. Canister filters, the aquarium counterpart of pond pressure filters, are popular for their large media capacity and out-of-sight installation. Oase, known for pond innovations, also offers aquarium filtration. For example, the BioMaster2 canister filter uses a prefilter to trap debris before it reaches the biomedia, keeping nitrifying bacteria efficient and simplifying cleaning.

Beyond filtration, aquascaping depends on stable conditions for plants. Regular water changes help reset water chemistry and prevent nutrient overload. High-intensity LED lighting has become standard, many models offering controllable intensity. Carbon dioxide (CO_2) injection boosts plant growth by increasing dissolved CO_2 during light periods. Nutrient-rich substrates like aquasoil, along with liquid fertilizers, provide balanced plant nutrition. Rimless, low-iron glass tanks now dominate the aquascaping scene, allowing the focus to remain on the scape itself.

Plants, Fish and Community

Take a close look at aquatic plants sold at pond supply stores and you'll notice overlap with aquarium plants. In fact, some are the exact same species—such as Bacopa caroliniana. Many genera cross over between ponds and aquaria, including Ludwigia, Rotala, Sagittaria, Lobelia, Nymphaea and more. This overlap offers endless opportunities for experimentation and collecting.





(Left) Emersed bins help hold and propagate plants, like this Hygrophila pinnatifida, until needed for the next aquascape layout. - (Right) Johnathan finding plants to incorperate into his scape.

Indoor aquariums also allow for a wider variety of fish than most outdoor ponds, especially in colder climates. Small schooling fish such as tetras and rasboras pair well with aquascapes, providing color, motion and scale without overwhelming the layout. Bright Ember Tetras (Hyphessobrycon amandae), for example, stand out beautifully against a green-planted background.

Beyond the plants and fish, perhaps the greatest parallel between ponds and aquariums is the people. Both hobbies thrive on community. Local aquarium clubs, meetings and events provide inspiration, knowledge and camaraderie.

Parting Thoughts

Between these parallels, it's no surprise many pond enthusiasts eventually discover a passion for aquascaping. This intersection allows you to apply skills you already have to a new, exciting medium—one that blends science, art and community.

Maybe this is your sign to take the plunge and enjoy nature up close this winter through the therapeutic practice of aquascaping.



Members and officers of our local Chicago Aquatic Plant Society

About the Author



Johnathon Butkus has had a lifelong passion for aquatic life. This led him to earn a degree in Aquatic Biology and Aquaculture. He went on to build a career across the aquarium industry, gaining experience in retail, maintenance, distribution, and manufacturer sales. Over the years, he has designed, installed, and maintained a wide range of aquatic systems—including aquariums, terrariums, vivariums, ponds, and filtration setups. Today, he draws on that expertise as the Midwest Regional Sales Manager for Atlantic-Oase.



Jennifer Bujalski, Manager of FFP Aquariums and Aquascaping ranked #297 out of 1,533 entries from 77 countries with this aquascape design. @jennpai_art



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When Your Pond RUNS OUT OF AIR

Why Oxygen is the Heartbeat of Your Pond







by Patrick Simmsgeiger,
Certified Lake Manager &
President of DWI

Still, quiet water can be deceiving. What appears calm on the surface may actually signal the slow suffocation of the ecosystem below. When a pond or lake begins to run low on dissolved oxygen (DO), the consequences unfold steadily—and often silently—until the damage becomes impossible to ignore. From foul odors and murky water to mass fish die-offs and toxic algal blooms, a pond in decline begins with something as fundamental as air.

Oxygen is the foundation of aquatic health. In every healthy body of water, DO supports essential life processes, from fish respiration to bacterial breakdown of organic material. Oxygen enters the water naturally through surface interaction with wind, rainfall and photosynthesis. However, in many ponds and lakes—especially man-made or nutrient-loaded systems—natural oxygenation isn't enough. That's when mechanical aeration becomes essential. Fountains, compressors and waterfalls

circulate water and inject oxygen into the system, helping life below the surface continue to thrive.

The Downward Spiral of Low Oxygen

When DO begins to drop, the balance of the ecosystem unravels. Beneficial bacteria—those responsible for breaking down organic waste—become less efficient. They shift from oxygen-based metabolism to using nitrate, which is also vital for plant health. Once nitrates are depleted, bacteria begin processing sulfates, producing hydrogen sulfide (H_2S)—a toxic compound responsible for the familiar "rotten egg" odor that is deadly to aquatic life. At this stage, even the most resilient fish begin to suffer, and plant life declines rapidly.

Compounding the problem is the natural accumulation of organic matter at the pond bottom. As leaves, algae, fish waste and other debris settle, they form a thick layer of muck. In an oxygen-rich environment, this material is broken down over time. In low-oxygen conditions, however, it simply builds up. The result is a shrinking pond depth, reduced water clarity and increased nutrient loading—perfect conditions for a harmful algal bloom (HAB).

Many HABs are caused not by true algae but by cyanobacteria, ancient microorganisms that lie in wait for the right conditions to expand rapidly. Warmer temperatures and increased nutrients from decomposing organic matter provide the perfect storm. Once a bloom occurs, it can introduce dangerous toxins to the water, putting animals, pets and humans at risk. And ironically, when the bloom dies off, the resulting biomass only adds to the oxygen demand—driving levels even lower.

Stratification further complicates matters. During warmer months, surface water remains warm and oxygen-rich, while cooler, deeper layers grow stagnant and depleted. If these layers are suddenly mixed—through turnover in



spring or fall, or by improper aeration—the redistribution of low-oxygen water and deep-layer nutrients can overwhelm the system. The result is fish kills and yet another round of algae growth.

Restoring Balance Through Aeration

The antidote to this silent suffocation lies in restoring oxygen and balance. Aeration not only increases DO but disrupts stratification, promoting a more uniform environment throughout the water column. With circulation comes improved biological activity: muck begins to break down, odors diminish and beneficial bacteria flourish. The system becomes more resilient to temperature swings, pollution and seasonal change. Fish are more active, plant roots grow stronger, and the entire ecosystem becomes more stable.

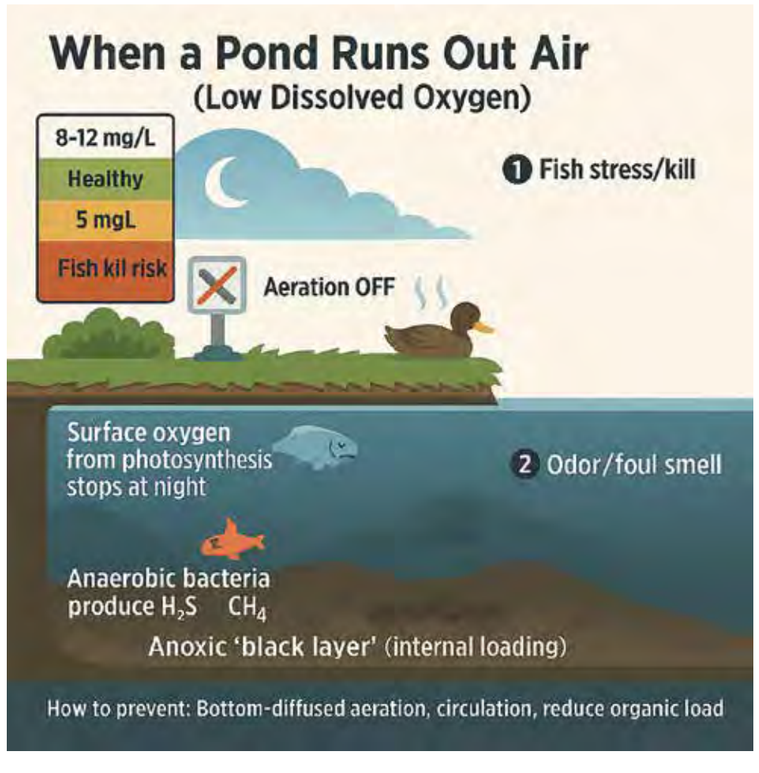
But even with proper aeration, timing and moderation are critical. Introducing oxygen too quickly into a stratified pond can cause harm if not carefully managed. Likewise, chemical treatments used to control algae must be balanced with biological processes. A thoughtful approach to aquatic health considers not only the tools available but also the sequence and sensitivity of natural systems. Less is often more, and patience plays a central role in recovery.

Respecting the Complexity of Ponds

True pond management blends science with experience. While technology such as aerators, dyes and treatments is invaluable, understanding when and how to apply them makes all the difference. Supplements like flocculants or enzymes can enhance water clarity and support microbial health, but only when the foundational elements—oxygen, circulation and ecological balance—are in place.

In many ways, a pond functions like the human body. It requires clean air, proper nutrition and the ability to heal. With the right care, even an aging or struggling pond can regain its vitality. The reward is more than just a beautiful view—it's a self-sustaining ecosystem that supports biodiversity, invites enjoyment and remains resilient in the face of environmental pressures.

We often admire our lakes and ponds for their beauty, but we must also respect their complexity. When water can no longer breathe, it slowly shifts from vibrant life to stagnant decay. By understanding the hidden role of oxygen, and by using the right tools at the right time, we can protect and restore our ponds—one breath at a time.



About the Author



Patrick Simmsgeiger is the founder and president of Diversified Waterscapes Inc. He is a licensed aquatic pesticide applicator, landscape contractor and certified lake manager. He is an expert in all stages of aquatic treatment, from product development and manufacturing to application and treatment. He specializes in watershed and water-quality management in lakes and reservoirs. Patrick also manufactures an EPA-registered chelated copper algaecide that is 100-percent natural and organic. Patrick is well known on the speaking circuit, recently having given a presentation at the ICAIS conference in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and at the California Lake Management Society's annual conference in Big Bear, California family pond build in the near future.





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From Overworked TO AUTOMATED

The Contractor's Guide to 2026 Success

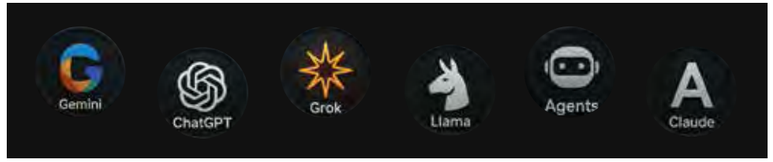
by Josh Meunier,
Mingma INC

What I'm about to share with you changed everything about how I view small-business efficiency. And if you really understand what I'm telling you, it'll change yours too.

Look, I need you to read this next sentence carefully because it matters more than you think: The contractors who dominate 2026 are making decisions right now, in 2025, that have nothing to do with better equipment or lower prices.

In January 2023, I was in a room full of entrepreneurs—successful people, all struggling with the same problems you face every day. Then someone showed us ChatGPT. Not just what it was—but what it meant. In 30 seconds, I watched it do something that took me and the team three weeks. That's when it hit me: This could change everything about how we approach efficiency in small business.

Here's why I'm telling you this: I work with distressed companies a lot, and they didn't get there because they couldn't build great products. It was because they were still playing yesterday's game, stuck in a mindset while



everyone else had moved on. I know it's a truth nobody wants to hear. Let me explain why I'm saying this. I'm not attacking your skills—I'm trying to help your company.

Stats to Take Note Of

Here's what's happening right now—and these aren't made-up numbers. They're from contractors and businesses just like you:

- 70%–90% time savings in admin and follow-up tasks
- $300,000 in recovered revenue from forgotten customers
- 50%–70% reduction in time-wasting spam calls
- 650% improvement in booked appointments

That's right. These are small businesses seeing big impacts with AI and automation. The only difference? They're embracing the opportunity. The market doesn't care that you've been building ponds for 20 years. It cares that you respond immediately.

Jeff Bezos said it best: "Customers will always want low prices, fast delivery and more selection." That's the power of AI and automation.

Let's think about this for a moment. What if I told you that you're not *really* in the pond business? Stay with me—I know this takes some reframing. You're in the customer acquisition and retention business that happens to deliver ponds. Once you understand this, everything changes.

Here's why this matters more than any technical skill you have: Every financial model I build shows the same bottleneck—the ability to consistently get and keep customers. You know that sick feeling when you realize you missed a lead while on a job? AI and automation help solve that problem.

Imagine an employee that responds to every lead within three minutes, 24/7. Imagine automated follow-up sequences that nurture leads until they're ready. Imagine smart systems that identify when existing customers need service before they call someone else. Imagine this kind of reputation management that turns every happy customer into new referrals. All of this is possible with an AI agent.

But here's what you really need to understand: This isn't just about saving time. It's about becoming the obvious choice in your market while your competitors are still playing phone tag.

This next part might be the thing that pays for your retirement. You're sitting on a gold mine and don't even know it.

Before I explain, think about this: How many customers have you lost touch with? Not because they were unhappy, but because you didn't have the time or energy after all the other things on the list? Here's what nobody tells you about those "lost" customers—they're not actually lost. They're waiting.

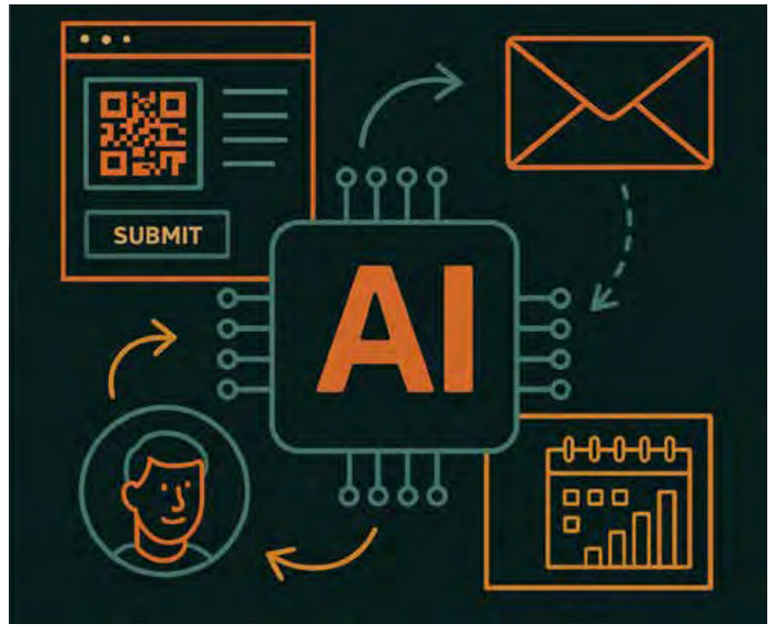
A Real Example That Should Wake You Up

A contractor just like you ran our AI analysis on his old customer list. He found 40 people ready for upgrades. That's $660,475 in work from people who already trusted him but didn't know he'd expanded his services. No advertising. No cold calls. Just intelligent re-engagement.

Many of you aren't doing this. But with AI agents and automation, it happens automatically. The system analyzes purchase patterns, seasonal timing, typical upgrade cycles. It knows when that customer who built a basic pond five years ago is probably ready for a waterfall feature.

Your customer list isn't just names and numbers. It's a predictable revenue stream waiting to be activated.

What I'm about to tell you changed my leadership style forever. Your job is to find ways to make your team and your business more productive. Your systems—technology—and your processes—people—are the difference between you enjoying weekends again or burning out.



Here are a few things now possible:

- Estimates written for the client with a follow-up sales meeting automatically booked
- Scheduling that coordinates between crews, weather and customer preferences
- Invoice processing and A/R follow-up that happens without you touching a keyboard
- Material ordering that predicts what you need and handles the communication
- Boosting bid submissions by 400% with better accuracy
- Job costing that updates in real time so you always know your margins

Buying Back Your Life With AI

But here's the frame that matters: This isn't about technology. It's about buying back your life.

I don't know about you, but I struggled with this too. Even if that's not your motivation, remember why you started your business in the first place. It wasn't to work 70-hour weeks wondering if you'll make payroll. That's not a life. That's a trap. And I'm trying to save you from it.

Pay attention to this next part, because once you see these numbers, you can't unsee them. Every day you wait to implement these systems costs you money. Not potentially—actually.

Would you believe it if I told you the average contractor leaves $180,000 on the table annually from poor follow-up? With AI costs ranging from $500–$5,000 a month plus implementation that equates to a ROI of 300%–900% in the first year. Ths means it would only take you six to eight weeks to break even.

A Harder Truth and Your Biggest Cost

I'm urging you to find your sense of urgency. 2026 is being determined right now, and every day you wait could be a month your competitor gets ahead. That's how fast this is moving.

Here's a harder truth: Our biggest cost as a company is employee turn-

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over. That means when you find the good ones, you must do anything to keep them. The bright side? Top-notch employees want to work for companies that operate like it's the modern day. They want support systems that let them go home happy at night. Peace of mind for your team builds culture, and culture builds profit.

If you think you're playing it safe by staying on the sidelines of the automation revolution, please read my last sentence twice.

Here's why I'm being so direct: I've seen what happens next. The slow slide. The gradual loss of customers. The realization that comes too late. And the heartbreak of shutting it all down.

You think you're being prudent by waiting to see how this AI thing plays out. But while you're waiting, three things are happening:

- Your competitors are building AI-powered customer relationships
- Your customers are getting used to instant, personalized service elsewhere
- Your market position is eroding, one lost lead at a time

Changing the Right Thing in Your Business

The real risk isn't learning something new or changing an old process. It's being the contractor still using a flip phone while everyone else has moved on. Remember, you don't need to change everything—you just need to change the right thing first.

Let me help with an example sprint we use with our clients: During **days 1–30 we** implement an AI lead response. Every lead gets contacted within three minutes. Just this one change typically recovers the entire investment. On **days 31–60 we** activate dormant customer re-engagement and let AI analyze your customer list and create a matrix. The outreach is to five clients a day and you can expect to book 5–10 appointments in 30 days. Finally, **on days 61–90 we** deploy operational automation. This starts with A/R collections, pre-call client messaging and content. This will save you 10–15 hours per week immediately.

Here's why this 90-day sequence matters: Each win funds the next improvement. It's self-reinforcing. By day 90, you'll be operating at a level that seemed impossible on day one. The most important thing is that you start now.

That day in January 2023, in that room full of entrepreneurs, we all had the same realization: This technology gives us the same leverage massive corporations have always had. We could either ride the wave or be crushed by it.

The question isn't whether AI will transform your industry. It's whether you'll be the one to adopt it and own a business—or wait too long and end up owning a job.

The future is here, and the choice is yours.

About the Author



Josh Meunier is an automation strategist, fractional COO/CFO, and founder of Mingma Inc., where he helps small and midsize service businesses implement AI, streamline operations, and scale profitably. He also co-founded PXE Solutions, a window-film company focused on energy efficiency for commercial and residential clients, and previously built and exited Liquidus Pool Services in Dallas.

With a career spanning leadership in sales, marketing, field operations, and data-driven finance, Josh brings a practical, operator's lens to AI adoption—designing workflows, playbooks, and dashboards that turn leads into booked jobs and jobs into repeat revenue. A former Forbes Business Development Council contributor, he writes and speaks about storytelling, intelligent systems, and building high-performance teams. Passionate about helping owners win back time and margin, Josh partners with outdoor-living companies to modernize scheduling, customer comms, and job costing—so teams can focus on craftsmanship and customer delight.

Aquashella 2025 in Edison, NJ Sees Record Attendance; Highlights Expansion into Koi & Pondkeeping

Aquashella 2025, held in Edison, New Jersey, made history with over 7,000 attendees, the highest turnout to date. Founded by George Mavrakis also known by CoralFish12g, the show has rapidly grown into a premier gathering for aquarium hobbyists, pond keepers, aquascapers, and aquatic industry professionals.

This year's edition featured more than 100 vendors, with strong representation from the koi and pondkeeping sectors. Participating vendors included Fitz's Fish Ponds, RNR Koi, Poly Tank, Aqua Meds, Aquascape (represented by Atlantic Water Gardens), and Predatory Fins (for exotic fish).

"From the beginning, I wanted Aquashella to be a place where every corner of the hobby could connect," said George Mavrakis. "We've always celebrated aquariums and aquascaping, but throughout this year we welcomed more koi and pond vendors than ever before and even held a koi show at our Dallas, TX Aquashella. At some point, all things lead to koi—that's where I see the intersection of the hobby. Whether I'm filming a reef tank for YouTube and the client takes me outside to show me their pond, or I'm visiting a koi pond and the homeowner says, 'By the way, I've got a reef tank in my office,' these worlds overlap more than people realize."

He told POND Trade Magazine Publisher Lauren Nolan that this blending of pond, koi, aquarium, and reef interests is not just incidental, but reflects what many hobbyists actually live.





What Aquashella Brought to the Table

Aquashella 2025 in Edison, NJ, offered a rich slate of contests, educational programming, interactive features, and kid-friendly events. Among these:

- Aquashella Aquascaping Contest: A live contest (sponsored by Fluval) in which selected aquascapers competed over two days, crafting underwater landscapes for judging and prizes.
- Kids Aquascaping Contest: The "Dustin's Fish Tanks" Kids Aquascaping Contest allowed young enthusiasts to design tanks, fostering early creativity in aquatics.
- Aquashella Koi Contest: A competition for koi keepers to showcase color, form, and beauty of koi fish, judged alongside local koi clubs.
- Stingray Contest (with Predatory Fins): Stingray breeders competed in a specialized contest, giving attendees a rare chance to see high-level stingray specimens.
- Clownfish Contest: Designer pattern and rare morph variants were judged for aesthetic excellence in this contest.
- American Shrimp Contest: Breeders and hobbyists competed to present the best shrimp varieties in terms of color, health, and overall presentation.
- Guppy Contest: Showcasing guppy hobbyists' breeding and morphological skills.
- Kids Zone & Activities: Fun, family-friendly features included the Kids Zone with crafts, aquarium-themed art & design, games, Mermaid Cove (face painting, sea creature themes), etc
- Speaker & Workshop Stages: Topics ranged from freshwater to saltwater, aquascaping techniques, pondkeeping, and reef care. (Workshops and demonstrations are regular features at Aquashella shows.)

Looking Ahead

With record participation in Edison, NJ, Aquashella 2025 has firmly set a new standard. George Mavrakis and the Aquashella team have made a clear statement: Aquashella is not only growing in size, but in scope. Those who attend or exhibit can expect future shows to continue emphasizing the intersection of pondkeeping, koi, aquariums, aquascaping, reef systems, and live contests that engage youth, experts, and enthusiasts alike.









Congratulations To The Contractor's Corner Winners!

Catching Up on Contractor's Corner

Pondliner is excited to announce the latest winners of our Contractor's Corner competition. Contractor's Corner was created to spotlight the incredible work of pond and water feature professionals around the world. Contractors are invited to submit their standout projects for a chance to be featured on our website, with one project selected each quarter to receive special recognition and a prize.

We want to take a moment to apologize for the delay in announcing recent winners. The high volume of submissions and the busy season in the pond industry made our selection process run a little behind schedule. We appreciate everyone's patience and continued enthusiasm for sharing their remarkable work.

We encourage all contractors to continue submitting their projects to Contractor's Corner. Each entry helps showcase the diversity and excellence within our industry, and every submission is an inspiration to other professionals and hobbyists alike.

Congratulations again to Chris, James, and Daniel for their outstanding work. We look forward to sharing more amazing projects in the months to come!



Q1 2025 Winner:
James Hiestand of DreamScapes, CA
Project: *Lifting Spirits*
James designed a therapeutic water garden to bring peace and joy to a client facing significant personal challenges. His project demonstrates the healing power of ponds, showing how water features can provide emotional as well as aesthetic value.



Q2 2025 Winner:
Daniel Taylor of Taylor'd Waterscapes, Australia
Project: *Recirculating Water Project at Moffat Beach*
Daniel completed a complex recirculating water project that combined functionality with a striking natural design on the Moffat Beach coastline. The system not only solved a difficult water management challenge but also enhanced the surrounding environment with a serene, coastal-inspired aesthetic.



Q4 2024 Winner:
Chris Ostrander of Living Water Landscapes, MI
Project: *New Pondless Waterfall Triumphs Over a Strict HOA & Rugged Landscape*
Chris created a pondless waterfall that seamlessly blended into a challenging, rocky terrain while also satisfying a strict homeowners association. The end result is a naturalistic water feature that feels at home in its rugged surroundings while providing lasting beauty for the client.

Atlantic-Oase PondJet Eco Premium



Introducing the latest in Oase Pulse 6 Technology, the PondJet Eco Premium floating fountain! Powered by the Aquarius Eco Premium Pump, the PondJet Eco Premium combines aeration with captivating water displays for ponds, lakes and large water features. The integrated nozzle allows for quick installation in minutes, while the fountain's Dynamic Function Control creates built-in scenes of varying water heights and patterns at the touch of a button. For even more versatility, up to 11 additional dancing water effects can be accessed through the Oase Control and the Oase Garden Cloud Controller. For nighttime enjoyment, the PondJet Eco Premium pairs seamlessly with the Floating Fountain RGB Illumination Set featuring three ProfiLux Lights, also controlled by Oase's Garden Cloud Controller! Check out the product on our website at https://www.atlantic-oase.com/products/product/2687



Break the Cycle – Naturally with Microbe Lift's NEW Nutrient Export

Microbe-Lift has introduced a breakthrough pond care product five years in the making: Nutrient Export. Designed for pond / water garden enthusiasts and pond professionals ready to move beyond harsh chemical treatments, Nutrient Export clears cloudy water by addressing the root cause of recurring algae. Its advanced blend of live, denitrifying bacteria targets and removes excess nitrates, the nutrients that fuel algae growth, to restore clarity and help keep ponds balanced over time.

This new approach encourages pond keepers to rethink how they maintain water quality. Instead of reacting to algae blooms with algaecides alone, Nutrient Export helps break the cycle by safely reducing the nutrients algae depend on, promoting long-term clarity and a healthier pond ecosystem.

"Ecological Laboratories, makers of Microbe-Lift, has long aimed to shift the industry away from harsh chemicals toward natural, environmentally friendly solutions," says Jason Faust, VP of Sales. "With Nutrient Export, pond owners and pond professionals can finally stop treating symptoms and start solving the root problem, recurring algae blooms, while keeping water clear and ecosystems healthy."

Use Nutrient Export after algae treatments or whenever nitrate levels are elevated to maintain a clean, natural pond environment without disruptive chemical applications. It's safe, effective, and built for pond owners and pond professionals looking to deliver dependable, sustainable results.



Pondliner.com is excited to announce that the 18th Annual Water Garden Expo will be held March 11th through March 13th, 2026, in Shawnee, OK at the Grand Casino Hotel & Resort.

The Water Garden Expo kicks off on Wednesday afternoon with educational seminars to begin after lunch. A Happy Hour will follow on the trade show with ample time to network and visit vendor booths.

The presentation of Pond Trade's 2025 Artisans of the Year will kick off Thursday morning with twenty-one seminars following over the next two days. Three educational tracks will provide learning opportunities for all knowledge levels. Attendees can visit with the largest gathering of manufacturers of any trade show and network with successful professionals from across the country and beyond.

As always, the Water Garden Expo is free to attend and open to trade professionals only. Visit WGExpo.com or call 866-219-3561 to register or for more information.

EasyPro To Launch Pond-Vive™ WG - Now Sized for Water Gardens

EasyPro Pond Products is excited to announce the 2026 release of Pond-Vive™ WG, a new water garden–sized version of its best-selling natural lake treatment, Pond-Vive™.

For over 20 years, Pond-Vive™ has been trusted by lake & pond professionals to restore water clarity, reduce muck, and improve overall water quality in lakes and larger ponds. With the introduction of Pond-Vive™ WG, EasyPro brings this proven beneficial bacteria blend to smaller ornamental ponds and water gardens with easy dosing.

"Pond-Vive™ has earned a reputation as one of the most reliable and effective natural treatments on the market," said EasyPro's Director of Sales, Matt Meachum. "With Pond-Vive™ WG, we're making that same science-backed performance available to homeowners and hobbyists with smaller ponds and water features. Pond-Vive™ is a beneficial bacteria powerhouse that is truly in a class of its own."





W Lim Corporation Presents The All American Koi Show 2026 – "Episode 3: Neon Nights!"

The All American Koi Show returns in 2026, bigger and brighter than ever! This year's event will feature an elite international judging panel, offering a showcase rarely seen outside of Japan.

For Contractors: Get ready for hands-on educational sessions designed to advance your expertise. Topics include: Helping clients choose the perfect koi champion. A live pond build demonstration covering bottom drains, UV systems, filtration, and ozone setup.

For Vendors: Registration opens soon!

Reserve your spot at www.allamericankoishow.com.

And why "Neon Nights"? Sign up for our newsletter to be the first to find out. Let's just say — when the sun goes down in Vegas, the fun is just beginning!

POND Trade Magazine Invites Readers to Renew and Stay Connected

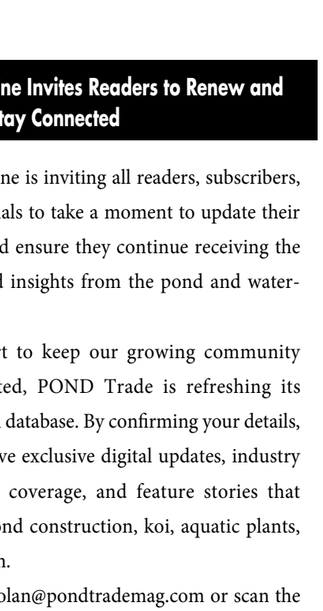
POND Trade Magazine is inviting all readers, subscribers, and industry professionals to take a moment to update their contact information and ensure they continue receiving the latest news, trends, and insights from the pond and water-feature world.

As part of our effort to keep our growing community informed and connected, POND Trade is refreshing its subscriber list and email database. By confirming your details, you'll continue to receive exclusive digital updates, industry announcements, event coverage, and feature stories that highlight the best in pond construction, koi, aquatic plants, and water-garden design.

Readers can email lnolan@pondtrademag.com or scan the QR code provided to fill out our quick renewal form. It only takes a moment — and helps us make sure you never miss an issue or important announcement.

"POND Trade has always been about connection — sharing ideas, inspiration, and innovation across the industry," said Lauren Nolan, Publisher of POND Trade Magazine. "We want to ensure every one of our readers stays informed as our community continues to grow."

Take a moment to renew today and stay part of the conversation shaping the pond industry!



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FINAL THOUGHT...

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