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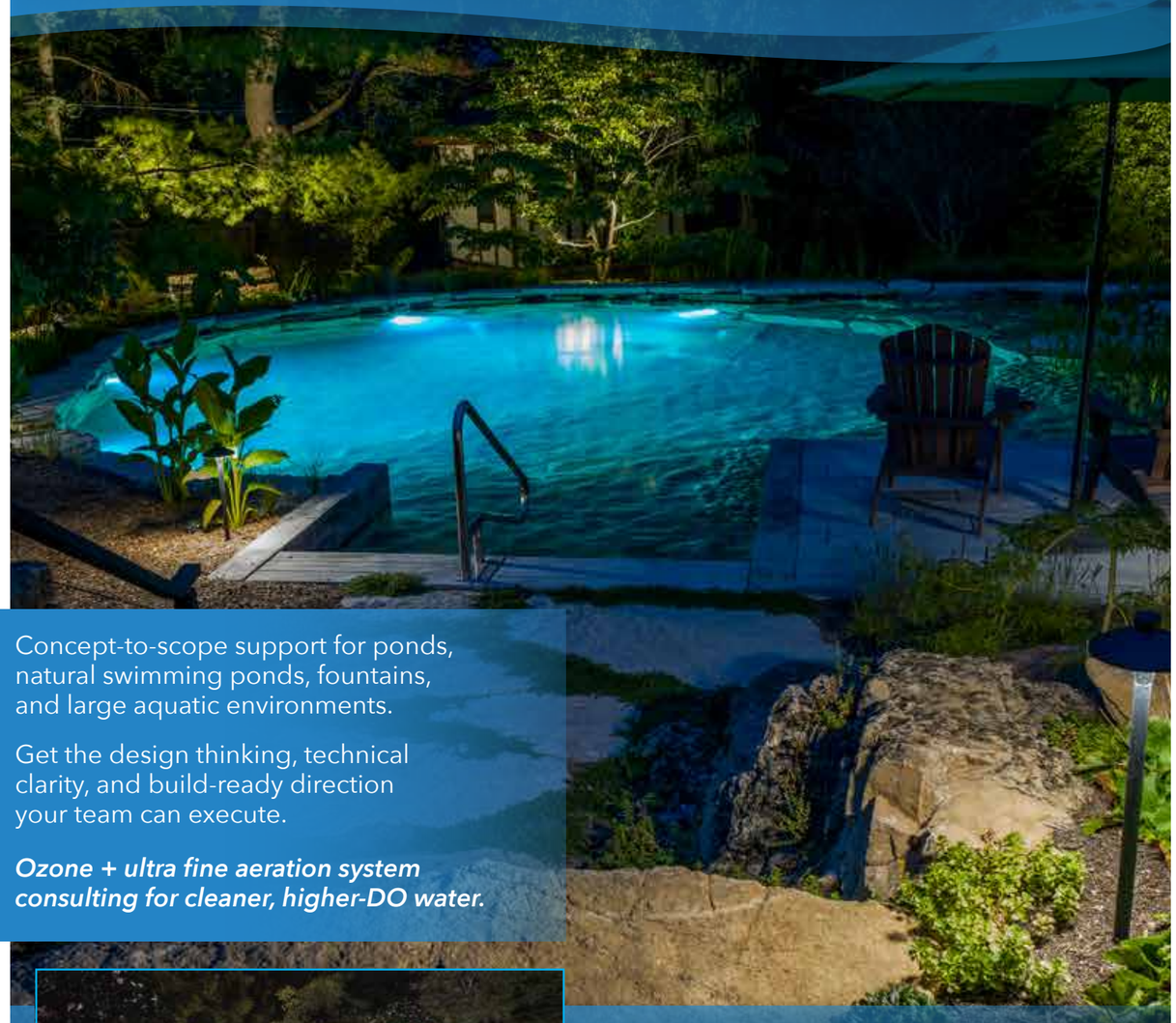
How a river rat's romp triggered a pond's evolution p.8

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Waterlily Weigh-Off p.14 | Water Features from Above p.36 | Goldfish Shows on the Rise p.45

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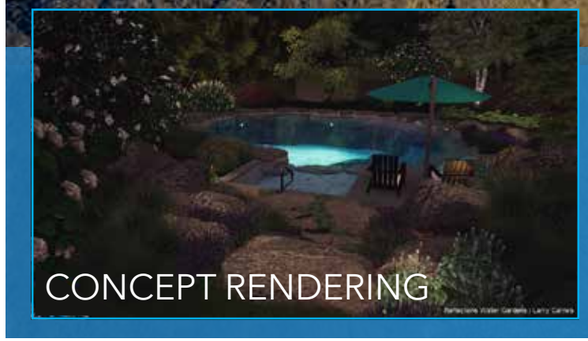
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8 Muskrat Love POND CONSTRUCTION

When a destructive muskrat leaves his beloved natural swimming pond in ruins, **Larry Carnes** turns disaster into opportunity. Discover how a complete rebuild became a chance to apply two decades of industry experience, incorporating advanced filtration, improved hydraulics and innovative design to create a healthier, more efficient waterscape.

14 Heavyweights of the Water Garden

How much weight can a single waterlily hold? The 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off shattered expectations as Bok Tower Gardens claimed its second consecutive championship with a record-breaking 285.7-pound leaf. As **Erin Bird** reports, this growing international competition is bringing aquatic horticulture, friendly rivalry and remarkable botanical achievements into the spotlight.

22 Not Alone on the Solo Road

Running a pond business can feel like a solo journey, but it doesn't have to be. **Ana Arntson** and **Jeff Gutowski** take readers inside the Pond Professionals Alliance's annual Pond Builders' Retreat, where contractors gathered to share ideas, strengthen business practices and build meaningful connections.

28 Five Years of Koi Fest

POND Trade Publisher, **Lauren Nolan,** takes readers inside the fifth anniversary of Koi Fest, highlighting the koi and goldfish shows, Japanese-style auction and unforgettable experiences that brought enthusiasts together.

36 Water Features from Above

Drone photography offers a whole new perspective on water feature construction, but capturing the perfect shot comes with responsibilities. **Chris Major** shares practical tips for showcasing ponds and waterfalls from above while navigating FAA regulations, licensing requirements and potential liabilities. Learn how to elevate your project photography while keeping your business protected.

45 Goldfish Shows on the Rise

Goldfish shows are making a comeback, and partnerships with koi clubs and pond retailers are helping fuel their growth. **Gary Hater, Joshua McWilliams** and **Bryson Foss** explore three successful show models, from Louisville to show how competition and collaboration are creating new opportunities for retailers, hobbyists and the pond industry.

52 Where Water Gardeners Gather

From historic waterlily gardens to cutting-edge plant research, the 2026 IWGS Symposium celebrated the beauty, science and community behind aquatic horticulture. **Julie Rechtien** takes readers inside the St. Louis gathering, highlighting exclusive garden tours, educational presentations, industry achievements and the lasting friendships that connect water gardeners around the world.

58 Built on a Grand Scale

Go behind the scenes of an extraordinary 100-foot recreation pond in Fletcher, North Carolina. **Joe Zawistowski** of Black Koi Water Features showcases this quarter's Contractor's Corner winning project, highlighting massive boulders, innovative ecosystem design and unique recreational features. Discover the craftsmanship, challenges and vision behind a water feature built on an exceptional scale.







DEPARTMENTS

6 **Upcoming Events**
62 **Trade News**
64 **Marketplace**
65 **Advertisers' Index**

COLUMNS

7 **Publisher's Perspective**



Upcoming **Events**

2026

December 1-4
Atlantic-Oase Winter Trainings
Aurora, OH
https://www.oase.com/en-US/pond-and-water-garden/contractor/contractor-trainings

2027

Januaary 13-15
Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show
Baltimore Convention Center
Baltimore, MD
www.mants.com

January 26-29
Atlantic-Oase Winter Trainings
Aurora, OH
https://www.oase.com/en-US/pond-and-water-garden/contractor/contractor-trainings

February 10-12
Water Garden Expo
Grand Casino Resort
Shawnee, OK
www.wgexpo.com

February 27-28
All American Young Koi Show
Miami, FL
www.allamericankoishow.com

March 6
The Koi Club of San Diego's 37th Annual Koi Show
Liberty Station
San Diego, California
www.koiclubofsandiego.org/2027_Show

March 12-14
Central Florida Koi and Goldfish Show
Wyndham Avanti Resort
Orlando, FL
www.cfks.org

March 17-18
Northeast Hardscape Expo
Mohegan Sun
Uncasville, CT
www.nehexpo.com

March 16-19
Atlantic-Oase Winter Trainings
Aurora, OH
https://www.oase.com/en-US/pond-and-water-garden/contractor/contractor-trainings

March 27-28
All Americal Koi Show
Silverton Hotel & Casino
Las Vegas, NV
www.allamericankoishow.com

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POND TRADE™

STAFF

Publisher
Lauren Nolan
lnolan@pondtrademag.com

Editor
Lauren Nolan
lnolan@pondtrademag.com

Advertising Sales
Lauren Nolan
lnolan@pondtrademag.com

Graphic Designer
Rae Cauley
rae@pondtrademag.com

Accounts Receivable
lnolan@pondtrademag.com

Web Editor
Joanne Costin
jcostin@contentforbiz.com

Printer
Sutherland Printing
Montezuma, Iowa

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Contact Info

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Publisher's Perspective

Still Waters, Lasting Impressions



As we close the final issue of 2026, I find myself reflecting on the projects completed, challenges overcome and relationships strengthened throughout our industry.

One of the things I appreciate most about publishing POND Trade is seeing our industry from so many perspectives. Contractors, growers, koi enthusiasts, manufacturers and business owners bring different expertise, yet we're connected by a shared passion for water.

Looking through this issue, a common theme emerged: Growth doesn't always mean building something bigger. Sometimes it means learning from setbacks, embracing innovation or connecting with others.

In "Muskrat Love: How a River Rat's Romp Triggered a Pond's Evolution" (pg. 8), Larry Carnes transforms a destructive setback into an opportunity to rethink his natural swimming pond. Joe Zawistowski pushes the boundaries of design and craftsmanship in "Built on a Grand Scale: Inside a 100-Foot Recreation Pond" (pg. 58), while Chris Major explores the opportunities and responsibilities of drone photography in "Water Features from Above" (pg. 36).

But some of our industry's most meaningful progress has little to do with technology or construction.

It has everything to do with people.

This year marked the fifth anniversary of Koi Fest, a gathering that has grown into a celebration of the hobby and the relationships surrounding it. In "Five Years of Koi Fest" (pg. 28), I reflect on that journey.

That same spirit appears in "Not Alone on the Solo Road" (pg. 22), where Ana Arntson and Jeff Gutowski highlight the value of contractors learning from one another.

Julie Rechtien takes us to the 2026 IWGS Symposium in St. Louis (pg. 52), where aquatic plant enthusiasts gathered to exchange knowledge. Our coverage of the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off (pg. 14) celebrates remarkable achievements and friendly competition, while "Goldfish Shows on the Rise" (pg. 45) explores how partnerships are strengthening the goldfish hobby.

Different stories, different specialties, but one common thread: Our industry is stronger when we learn, innovate and support one another.

As the year winds down, I encourage you to reflect on what you've accomplished.

Think about the pond that challenged your crew, the waterfall that required extra creativity or the project that exceeded expectations.

Those projects deserve recognition.

Our Water Artisans of the Year Awards celebrate the craftsmanship, creativity and dedication that define this industry. Whether your project was large or small, traditional or unconventional, we want to see what you've created.

Gather your photos, reflect on your accomplishments and submit your work for consideration. Encourage fellow contractors to enter, too.

As we look toward 2027, I hope you'll continue sharing your stories and expertise. To our readers, contributors, advertisers and industry partners, thank you for another wonderful year.

Here's to everything we've built, the connections we've made and the possibilities ahead.

Happy holidays!

Lauren Nolan
Publisher, POND Trade Magazine





MUSKRAT LOVE

Larry Carnes' personal pond — before the damage that brought about a remake.

How a river rat's romp triggered a pond's evolution

by Larry Carnes,
Reflections Water Gardens

The busy beaver has nothing on muskrat love. I've got the pond to prove it.

I stood on my patio that late fall day three years ago and stared at sheer destruction. One determined river rat partied at my expense in the natural swimming pond that inspired me to start my company.

Liner torn, plants crushed, stones out of place. Crucial components chewed through. The rodent burrowed through the pond's structural edges. The pond that started me on my journey to create the perfect waterscape was totaled. I felt heartsick.

To fully understand how deeply the muskrat's party in my pond affected me, let's rewind two decades. When my wife, Becky, and I bought our house, we wanted a swimming pool in the backyard. After a bunch of contractor interviews it became clear that nobody was building the kind of natural swimming pool we envisioned. So I built it myself.



Muskrats are powerful chewers and can easily tear through pond liners and aeration equipment. Shorelines collapse as they dig underwater tunnels into embankments.

Something happened during those early days of designing and building that first large-scale water feature. I discovered a passion that aligned with my lifelong love of nature, plants and water. We also quickly realized that ponds serve multiple purposes.

The pond was a reflection of our lifestyle, our private backyard escape and an ideal space for entertaining family and friends. It was also my living laboratory, perfect for testing oxygenation and biofiltration technologies, and terrific for experimenting with biodiversity management and infrastructure development.

The Mess Before Me

So as I stood there that day, surveying the mess before me, all I could think about was loss. Yet in the back of my mind, a glimmer of opportunity started to take shape.

I knew I had no choice but to rebuild, so I became my own client. The remake would become the next generation of the first pond, showcasing decades of key learnings. I still had a lot of tinkering with oxygenation and filtration on my to-do list, so the laboratory would take on new experiments focused on next-level improvements.

Throughout the next two years, the Reflections Water Gardens crew and I worked to design and rebuild my pond in between client jobs. No quick fixes here. We started from scratch.



Boulders and 40 yards of excavated soil were staged in a common area of the subdivision, before they could be used or hauled away.

Due to structural limitations on the property, including mature trees and shrubs, I kept the original footprint and mirrored its general attributes. We got to work draining the existing 8-foot-deep pool and removed the wasted liner, aquatic plants and existing boulders.

My patience was tested as I took down our pergola and hauled heavy equipment over our brick patio. I had a new appreciation for how our clients must feel during their early days of pond construction. I am happy to report, however, that with only one layer of plywood protection on my patio, the 60,000-pound excavator did zero damage.

We resculpted the basin, scooping out 40 yards of soil and sending it in Super Sacks to a neighboring construction project. New stone was staged in the common area of our subdivision. Fortunately, that was right behind our house.

Most of the blasted rocks are from northern Wisconsin, along with black granite and limestone outcroppings. I reused some of the boulders from the original pond and had others hauled away. We used fewer smaller rocks and integrated larger boulders to give the new water feature weight and anchor it into the landscape.

The Rebuild Begins

We laid the geotextile, matrix blocks and new pond liner, piping and upgraded filtration, and remade the existing 2-foot waterfall on the northwest end. We're piping about 30,000 gallons of water through the new pond, only slightly more than the old one. Flows turn over more than once an hour.

The original pond featured a beach and stream on the far east end. I replaced those with extra-wide steps made of precast concrete. I like how they mimic weathered railroad ties.

The steps descend from the patio to a sand-bottom wading pool adjacent to new lotus and water lily beds. Because they can wander, lotus and water lilies are planted in separate underwater containers. This practice has become my signature on pond builds and renovations.

Like the original pond, the remake features distinct areas for wading, swimming and sunning. Submerged, black granite walls separate two shallower pools and the 8-foot-deep swimming area, where the waterfall is the focal point. Around the pond, strategically placed boulders provide places for relaxing.



The original pond featured a beach and stream at this end. Larry and his team replaced them with extra-wide steps made of precast concrete, and separate lotus and lily beds near the wetland filter.

Existing trees and shrubs survived the construction pretty well, as we had purposefully worked around them. Located at the back and sides of the pond, they provide privacy and a sense of seclusion in the natural setting. Newly planted aquatics and native perennials lend seasonal interest.

As we rebuilt, two summers passed slowly without our pond. I missed it as I designed and installed waterscapes for clients.

Tearing out my own work after 20 years in business was a reality check. When I built the original pond, our industry was in a very different place and so was I. Equipment was clunkier. Pipe sizing was sometimes a guess. Filtration was a mystery. We scratched our heads over flow dynamics. We really have come a long way.

Blank Slate Applications

Just as one step leads to another, each pond we build for clients presents fresh experiences and new opportunities to expand our thinking about the nature, function and value of custom waterscapes. One muskrat caused a lot of damage. But it gave me a blank slate on which to apply future key learnings.





Larry Carnes and his crew at Reflections Water Gardens re-sculpted the pond's 8-foot-deep basin. With only one sheet of playwood under the 60,000 pound excavator, the machine caused zero damage to the brick patio.

Throughout the rebuild, I discovered that good hydraulics is everything. It creates a balanced ecosystem, moves water efficiently and supports optimal water quality as it uses less energy. By enhancing circulation across the pond's basin, water moves gently and remains clear over extended periods, creating a healthier environment for people, plants and fish.

I used the original pond to begin pushing experiments beyond optimal filtration to supreme biofiltration, tinkering with ozone-based oxygenation and enhanced hydraulic circulation. I'm applying and perfecting it further in the pond remake. And while I'm continually tweaking the right balance of oxygen and flow, water clarity and ecosystem health have been outstanding in both the old and the new pond.

The proprietary system dissolves oxygen, improves circulation and suppresses algae in natural swimming pools and large koi ponds. This exciting ozone technology is included in our new client builds, retrofits and pool conversions. And it seems to be catching on. Industry response has been strong.

Over the years, I've also experimented with the viability and functionality of sand-bottom ponds. I've studied how sand, native plants and aquatic life work together to support localized biodiversity. Sand was only present in part of our former pond but now covers the entire bottom. Water quality is clear to the bottom, where you can see what's beneath your feet and enjoy its softness.

Creating Clear Reflections

There was also a surprise benefit to rebuilding the pond that I wasn't expecting. I added koi to the water late







Top: Lotus and water lilies are planted in separate, submerged containers to control their spread. This has become Larry Carnes' signature on his custom pond builds and conversions. Bottom: Water so clear, every detail beneath the surface comes to life.



Following two years of construction, Larry Carnes' remade swimming pond opened this past summer — a clear reflection of the original.

last summer. With downturned mouths and double pairs of sensory whiskers, koi are natural bottom feeders. They root through the sand for insects, plant material, algae and small organisms. In other words, they help keep the sand clean. That means clearer, healthier water and less work for me.

We finished the new pond with enhanced LED lighting that meets strict electrical safety standards for human immersion. We installed it under the water to illuminate textures and plant silhouettes.

The lights are UL-listed, low-voltage LEDs designed to provide safe underwater illumination, especially in the pond's shallow areas. They run on harmless 12-volt power through a plastic, shockproof design. I will have total peace of mind as we swim and entertain family and friends.

Finally, our remade pond opened this past summer. We thoroughly enjoyed it as tours, parties and gatherings resumed. So with the construction complete, the pond is maturing nicely and koi are swimming happily.

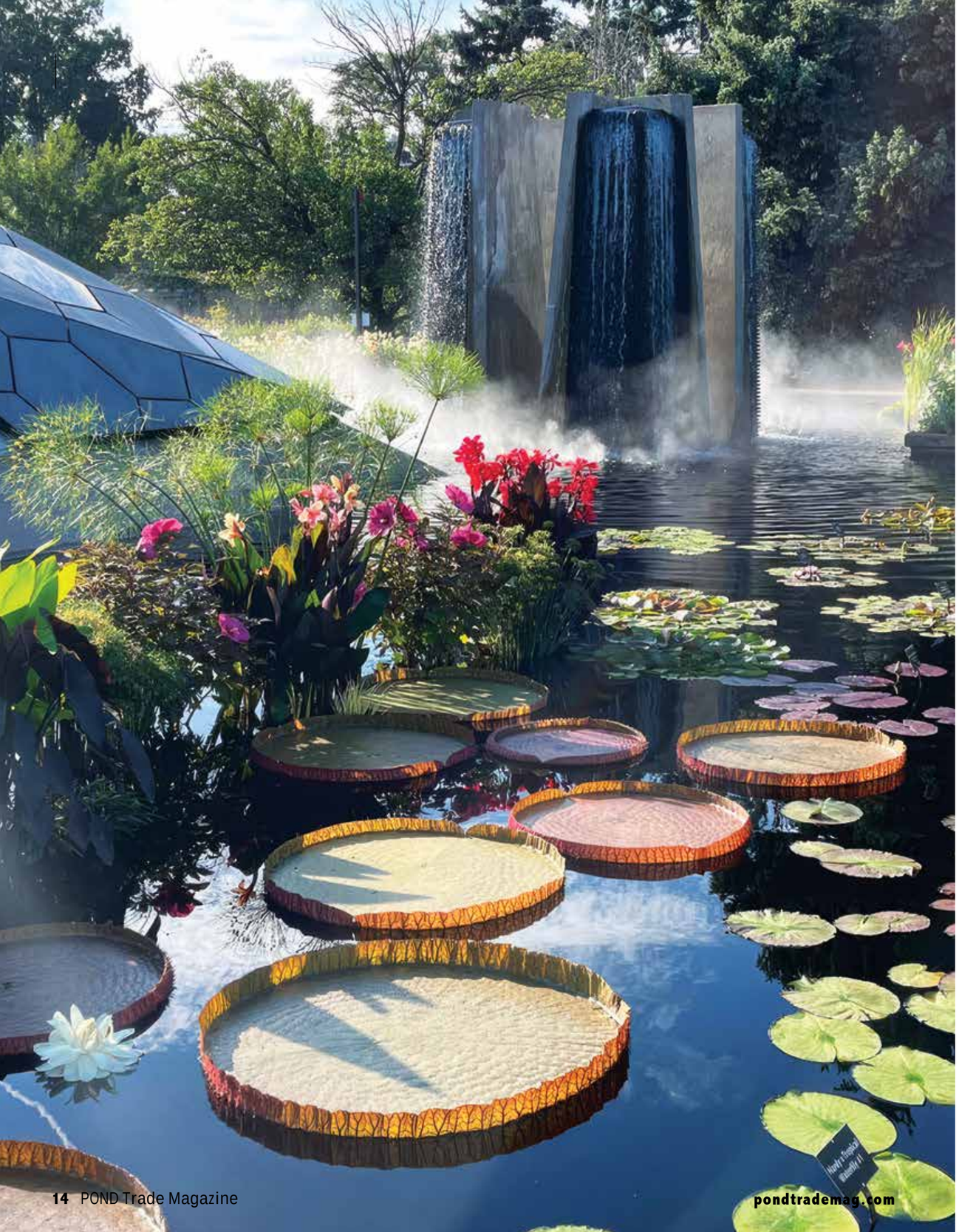
I'm sitting on my patio again, sketching out a few ideas and planning for future announcements. I'm still not happy with the muskrat, but I am happy with the new pond. The remake is proving to be a clear reflection of the original.

About the Author



Larry Carnes is the founder, owner and president of Reflections Water Gardens. With more than 30 years of experience in the industry, Larry has transitioned from hands-on contractor to visionary leader focused on the intersection of natural artistry and company culture.

Known for his "nature first" design philosophy, he crafts high-end, ecologically balanced water features that appear as though they have existed for centuries. Through his award-winning work, Larry is an advocate for elevating the pond build trade by prioritizing core values, structured leadership and team empowerment. Learn more about Reflections Water Gardens at www.reflectionswatergardens.com.



HEAVYWEIGHTS OF THE Water Garden

Bok Tower Gardens sets a new record during the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off

by Erin Bird,
Denver Botanic Gardens

How much weight can a waterlily really hold?

Apparently, a lot more than most people would expect.

A Victoria waterlily grown by Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, Florida, supported an astonishing 285.7 pounds during the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off, earning the garden its second consecutive Heavyweight Champion title and setting a new high mark for the annual international competition.

What started four years ago as a playful social media experiment by Denver Botanic Gardens has quickly grown into a global celebration of aquatic plants, horticultural skill and a healthy dose of competitive creativity.

The fourth annual Waterlily Weigh-Off took place Aug. 17-26, bringing together more than 60 entries from gardens and zoos representing 12 countries. The 2026 competition also expanded beyond public gardens with increased participation from home growers and commercial nurseries.

"This year's competition was truly

impressive," said Rachel Small-Brooks, assistant manager of social media and communications at Denver Botanic Gardens. "We received more than 60 entries from gardens and zoos representing 12 countries. Our home grower participation grew this year as well with 12 participants. It's by far our biggest year yet!"

And if the numbers are any indication, the waterlilies are getting stronger, too.

From Social Media Experiment to Global Competition

The Waterlily Weigh-Off began in 2023 without much expectation that it would become an annual international event.

Denver Botanic Gardens originally hoped to create a collaborative social media post with several other gardens. According to Small-Brooks, those plans did not exactly work out.

"We wanted to do a collaborative post with a few gardens where we had contacts," she said. "They all said no, but we posted anyway and called them out in a bit of a cheeky way. That led to a few of them posting their entries, albeit maybe a bit reluctantly."

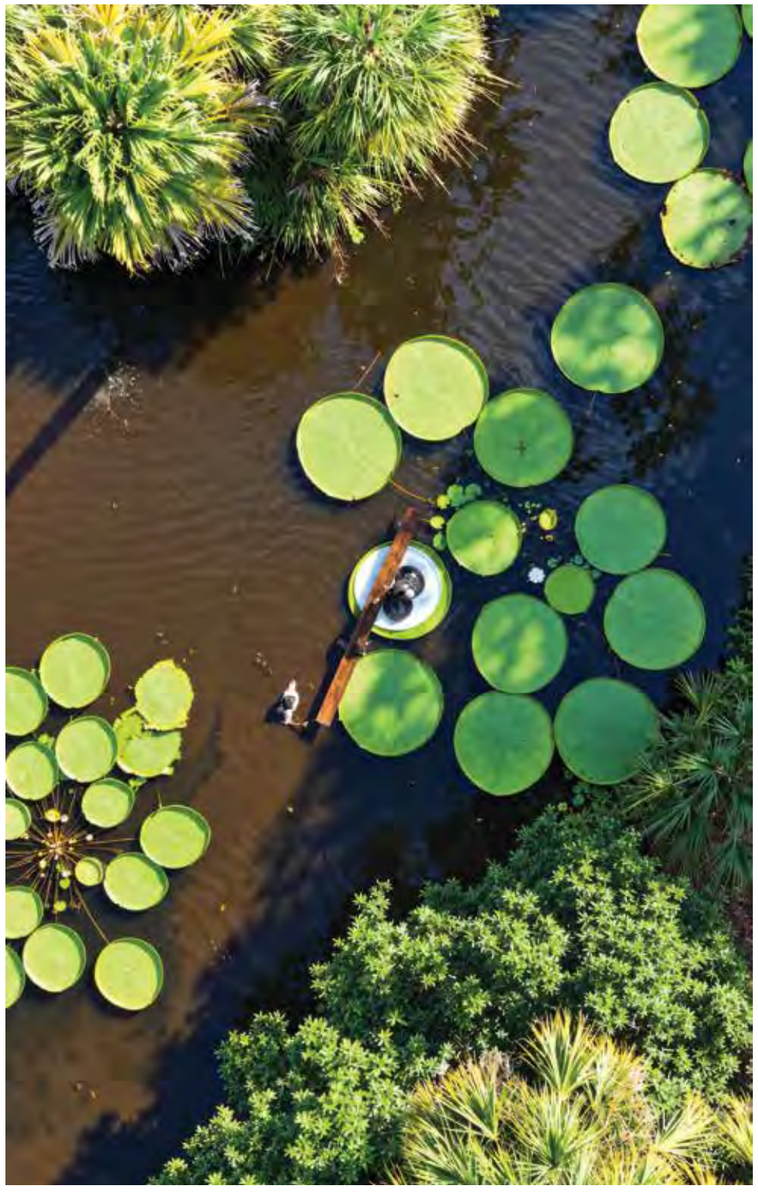
The friendly challenge took off.

The concept is wonderfully simple: Grow the biggest, strongest Victoria waterlily possible, determine how much weight one of its massive floating leaves can support and share the attempt online.

Victoria waterlilies are particularly suited for the challenge. Their enormous floating leaves can reach up to 10 feet in diameter, with an intricate network of ribs underneath providing structural support.

The competition highlights Victoria amazonica, Victoria cruziana, Victoria boliviana and Victoria 'Longwood Hybrid,' giving viewers who might initially tune in for the spectacle an introduction to some of the aquatic plant world's most remarkable specimens.

That educational component has remained an important part of the competition, even for its founder.



The team at Bok Tower Gardens carefully places weights on a giant waterlily pad during the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off.

Denver Botanic Gardens has yet to capture the heavyweight title. Before 2026, its personal best was 65 pounds, recorded in 2024. This year, Denver improved substantially, finishing 14th with a leaf that supported 80 pounds.

"We joke that we started a competition we had no chance of winning," Small-Brooks said. "But that's OK. The competition gives us the opportunity to reach more people and educate about the role aquatic plants play in our ecosystems."

Raising the Bar — and the Weight

The amount of weight supported by the winning waterlily has climbed dramatically since the competition began.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, won the inaugural competition in 2023 with 96 pounds.

A year later, Missouri Botanical Garden raised the standard significantly when its winning leaf supported 142.1 pounds.

Then came Bok Tower Gardens.

In 2025, Bok Tower captured its first Heavyweight Champion title with a leaf that supported 183 pounds, narrowly edging Missouri Botanical Garden's 182-pound entry.

The 2026 competition was not nearly as close.

Bok Tower's winning leaf held 285.7 pounds — more than 100 pounds above its previous winning mark.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, returned to the podium with a second-place finish at 224.9 pounds, while Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania finished third at 210 pounds.

Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pennsylvania placed fourth at 163 pounds, followed by Missouri Botanical Garden at 149 pounds.

The rest of the top 10 included the University of Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum at 127.9 pounds; Naples Botanical Garden at 109 pounds; Sarah P. Duke Gardens at an even 100 pounds; New York Botanical Garden at 95 pounds; and Hortus Botanicus Amsterdam at 92.6 pounds.

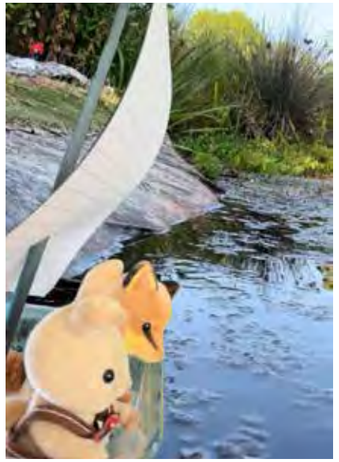
The results illustrate just how international the competition has become. Entries arrived from throughout the United States as well as England, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Norway, Scotland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and other locations around the world.



A remarkable display of strength! The team at Bok Tower Gardens put their winning waterlily to the test, carefully balancing on its massive floating leaf to demonstrate its incredible strength and weight-bearing capacity during the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off.



A little strength and a little humor! The team at Royal Botanic Gardens put their waterlily to the test using gym weights and an unexpected addition — baked beans! They even stepped onto the massive floating leaf themselves, showcasing its impressive strength and weight-bearing capacity during the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off.





An epic adventure on a tiny scale! University of Bristol Botanic Garden reenacted The Odyssey aboard its miniature waterlily for the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off.

Making Room for More Growers

The heavyweight competition may generate the biggest numbers, but 2026 marked an important expansion of the Waterlily Weigh-Off.

Organizers introduced additional categories designed to make participation accessible to growers and institutions of different sizes.

University of Bristol Botanic Garden in Bristol, England, captured the inaugural Featherweight Champion title with a creative entry.

New York Botanical Garden earned Fan Favorite honors, selected by audiences on Instagram and TikTok.

Perhaps most relevant to the professional pond and water-gardening community was the introduction of the Ultimate Grower category, which opened the competition to home growers, commercial nurseries and other aquatic plant specialists.

Red Leaf Exotics captured the inaugural Ultimate Grower title with an impressive 195-pound result.

The competition in that category was remarkably close. Iis Garden finished at 194.01 pounds, less than a pound behind the winner, while Kwekerij Bandus reached 176.37 pounds.

Other Ultimate Grower participants included Ed the Pond Professor of Aquascape at 55 pounds; St. Louis Water Garden Society at 49 pounds; Riley Wilde at 47.3 pounds; Chalily Pond & Gardens at 42.7 pounds; Bergen Water Gardens at 41.75 pounds; Nelson Water Gardens at 21.8 pounds; and Agua.be at 16.37 pounds.

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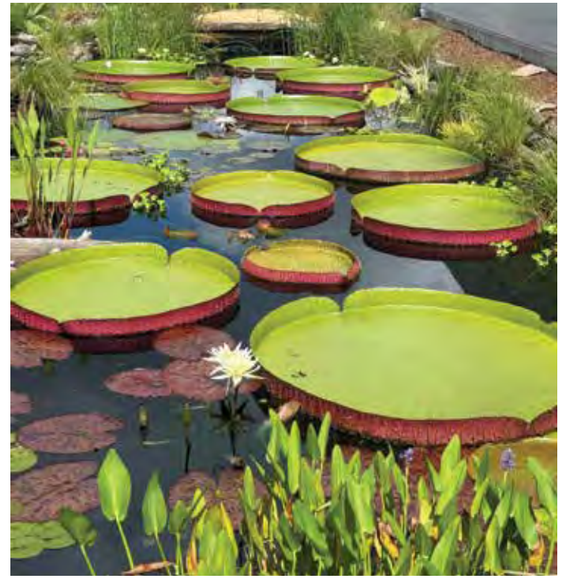
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Red Leaf Exotics earned the title of Ultimate Grower Champion in the 2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off with an impressive 195-pound weigh-in.

Not every entry took the pursuit of maximum weight quite so seriously. Two Little Fruits submitted an entry involving one toy horse, while Two Feral Gardeners recorded an entry of just 0.2 ounces.

That mix of serious horticulture and deliberate absurdity is part of what has made the competition work.

More Than a Number on a Scale

Behind every stack of weights is a much larger story about aquatic horticulture.

Successfully growing Victoria waterlilies requires an understanding of temperature, nutrition, water quality, growing space and the particular needs of plants capable of producing leaves several feet across.

Yet the Waterlily Weigh-Off packages that horticultural expertise in a format almost anyone can understand.

There is no complicated judging rubric for the public to decipher. A giant waterlily sits in the water. Weight is carefully added. Eventually, something gives.

That simplicity has proven particularly well suited to social media.

Participating organizations have increasingly turned their weigh-off attempts into full productions, incorporating costumes, props, themes, storytelling and the personality of their individual gardens into their entries.

"The production level of this year's competition was also incredible," Small-Brooks said. "Every entry was incredibly well done and highlighted the unique personality of each garden. We're already brainstorming what we're going to do next year to stand out."

The result is something relatively rare in horticulture: highly shareable entertainment that also creates an opening for education.

Someone may initially watch because they want to see whether a giant lily pad can hold 200 pounds. In the process, they encounter botanical gardens, aquatic plant collections and Victoria species they may never have known existed.

For public gardens, nurseries and other organizations trying to introduce aquatic horticulture to new audiences, that reach can be particularly valuable.

A Growing Global Stage for Aquatic Plants

The 2026 field demonstrates just how far the Waterlily Weigh-Off has traveled from its modest beginnings.

Beyond the heavyweight contenders, Featherweight participants included institutions such as Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Royal Botanic



The sharp spines along the edges and undersides of Victoria waterlilies help protect the leaves from hungry fish and other herbivores.







Garden Sydney, Auckland Botanic Gardens, Royal Botanical Gardens Canada, the United States Botanic Garden, San Diego Botanic Garden, Filoli, Conservatory of Flowers and the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

The main heavyweight field stretched from Florida to Norway and included some of the best-known botanical institutions in the world alongside regional gardens, arboretums, conservatories and zoos.

For the pond industry, the addition of the Ultimate Grower category may be particularly noteworthy. It gives nurseries, water-garden specialists, professional growers and serious hobbyists a place alongside major botanical institutions — and another reason to experiment with growing Victoria waterlilies themselves.

The event also demonstrates what can happen when horticultural organizations are willing to loosen their ties, have a little fun and embrace the unpredictable nature of social media.

There is legitimate horticultural skill behind producing a Victoria leaf capable of supporting hundreds of pounds. But instead of presenting that expertise exclusively through technical interpretation, the Waterlily Weigh-Off turns it into a spectacle.

That spectacle now reaches across continents.

Four competitions in, Bok Tower Gardens has pushed the heavyweight benchmark to 285.7 pounds. The Ultimate Grower competitors are already approaching 200. More institutions and private growers are joining the challenge.

And Denver Botanic Gardens — which started the whole thing despite still waiting for its own heavyweight victory — is already looking toward the fifth annual competition in August 2027.

The obvious question is no longer whether anyone will participate.

It is this:

How much more weight can these waterlilies possibly hold?

About the Author



Erin Bird is the director of marketing and communications at Denver Botanic Gardens, where she has worked for 13 years. She oversees storytelling, media relations, marketing and community engagement initiatives. Previously, she held positions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Marshall Field's. Bird has presented at American Public Gardens Association conferences and served on several arts-focused boards.

2026 Waterlily Weigh-Off: Top 10 Heavyweights

The competition reached new heights in 2026, with three Victoria waterlily leaves supporting more than 200 pounds. Bok Tower Gardens defended its title — and shattered its previous 183-pound winning mark — with a leaf that held an incredible **285.7 pounds.**

RANK	GARDEN	WEIGHT
1	**Bok Tower Gardens** — Florida	**285.7 lbs.** 129.5 kg
2	Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew — England	**224.9 lbs.** 102 kg
3	Longwood Gardens — Pennsylvania	**210 lbs.** 95.25 kg
4	Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens — Pennsylvania	**163 lbs.** 73.94 kg
5	Missouri Botanical Garden — Missouri	**149 lbs.** 67.55 kg
6	University of Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum — England	**127.9 lbs.** 58 kg
7	Naples Botanical Garden — Florida	**109 lbs.** 49.44 kg
8	Sarah P. Duke Gardens — North Carolina	**100 lbs.** 45.36 kg
9	New York Botanical Garden — New York	**95 lbs.** 43 kg
10	Hortus Botanicus Amsterdam — Netherlands	**92.6 lbs.** 42 kg

By the numbers:

Bok Tower Gardens' winning leaf supported **102.7 pounds** more than its 2025 championship leaf and nearly triple the **96-pound** winning weight from the inaugural competition in 2023.



The attendees of the 2026 Pond Builders' Retreat, Still Reserve, Newaygo, MI.

NOT ALONE ON THE SOLO ROAD

Inside the pond builders' retreat

by Ana Arntson,
Pond Profesionals Alliance
& Jeff Gutowski,
Break The Image

Following the annual Pond Builders' Retreat, the Pond Professionals Alliance private contractor Facebook group is abuzz with sentiments like this one from George Mihalchik of Ponds by George, "I'm grateful to be in a room with you all. To be in an industry with people with the same passions is amazing. BUT to be in the same room with these people who truly want to help each other be better is truly heartfelt. Thank you all for sharing yourselves."

When Craig McBride and I co-founded the Pond Professionals Alliance (PPA) in late 2023, we dreamt of bringing pond builders together to share in supportive resources. We didn't want to preach one right way of doing things. We wanted to uplift the diverse methods that make our small businesses unique. We wanted to unite pond builders so no one feels alone in this world of small-business water feature entrepreneurship. Over the years, we've watched the PPA grow to nearly 500 members, and our yearly Pond Builders' Retreats are the pinnacle of what the PPA is all about.

This year's retreat brought pond builders, industry leaders and our team of business educators together at Stillwater Reserve in Newaygo, Michigan, for three days in September. We gathered to learn, connect and relax. The learning sessions sent attendees home fired up, and we will get to those. But the connection and relaxation were the real heart of the retreat. Time to fish, soak up nature and ease into honest conversations about the challenges and wins in our businesses is rare for a contractor. It is also exactly what makes these retreats special.

Stepping Out of the Grind

Over and over we heard the same thing from attendees. It feels good to step out of the grind, take a breath and remember why you fell in love with this work in the first place.

If you build water features for a living, you know the grind well. Spring hits and the phone does not stop. You are in the mud by seven, on the phone with a supplier at lunch and writing estimates at the kitchen table after dinner. There is never a good week to leave. That is precisely why the retreat matters. The pause is not a break from the business. It is the thing that lets you steer it.

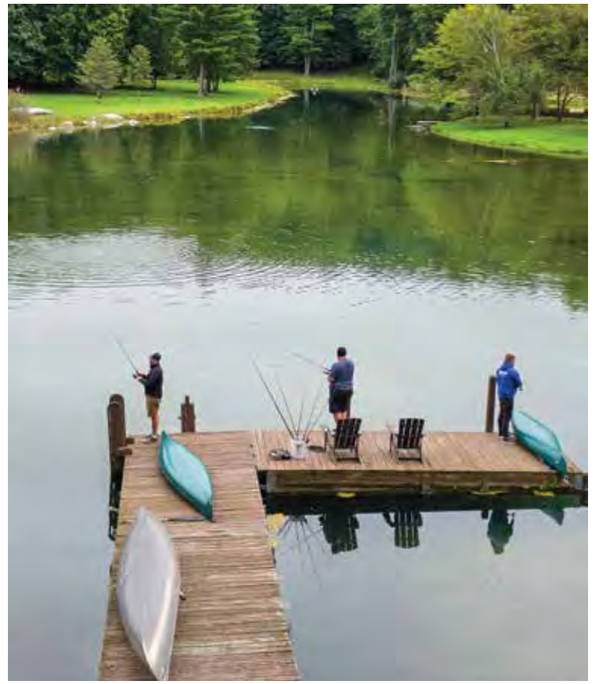
Attendees told us the pause gave them room to reorient. To ask where they want their business to go next. To decide what to say yes to this winter and what to let go of. And then to build the momentum and gather the resources to actually move. The resources at our fingertips are key. More on those in a moment.

Learning Both Sides of the Business

Success in this industry requires two things: knowing how to build a great pond and knowing how to build a great business. The retreat was built around both.

Sessions on the latest in ozone technology and lake management sat right beside sessions on running the back end of your company. Clayton Graba of Kaeru CX walked through systems that take the chaos out of scheduling, following up and getting paid. Jeff Gutowski of Break The Image, the PPA's web and marketing partner and the muscle behind the PondPros.com website, covered how to make the most of your website and the rest of your web presence. His session produced some of the most talked-about takeaways of the weekend, and we share them below.

Between sessions, the retreat center was brewing over with ideas. Someone would leave a talk on ozone and end





Top: Attendees step out of the daily grind to recharge, soak up nature and enjoy some downtime fishing at Stillwater Reserve. Bottom: Between sessions, attendees share ideas, experiences and honest conversations about the challenges and wins in their businesses.



up in a 40-minute conversation at the fire pit about how to price it. Someone else would hear about a scheduling tool and find three people who already used it and could tell them what to watch out for. That is the part no slide deck can give you. Community is the ultimate resource.

It is in community that we process what we are learning and talk through our hesitations and excitement about putting it into practice.

It is in community that we find the support and motivation to turn what we learn into action.

It is in community that we realize we are not in this alone but are widely supported in our goals.

We can all find countless educational resources for growing a water feature business. But without a supportive system, those resources leak through the cracks like a poorly built waterfall. The PPA aims to provide both the resources and the system that lets pond professionals put them to work.



Pond Pros learning the ins and outs of optimizing their businesses.



PPA Co-Founder, Craig McBride, preps session on Ozone.

What the Room Learned About Being Found Online

Before the retreat, Jeff asked attendees to send him their websites. He spent weeks going through them the way a homeowner would, on a phone, with no idea who any of these companies were. Then, with their permission, he put several of them on the screen in front of the room and walked through what was working and what was quietly costing them jobs.

That is a vulnerable thing to sign up for, and every builder who did deserves credit. The room learned more from those real sites than from any example someone could have made up.

Here is what Jeff would hand to every pond builder reading this, whether you were at the retreat or not.

Your first impression happens on Google, not on your website. Most homeowners never see your beautiful portfolio. They search "pond builder near me," look at the first three or four results, read a couple of reviews and call someone. If your Google Business Profile is thin, has old photos or lists the wrong service area, you are losing the job before anyone sees a single waterfall you built. Fill it out completely. Add real photos every month. Ask for reviews after every install and reply to every one.

A pretty homepage does not win searches. Topic authority does. This was the core of Jeff's session. Google tends to favor sites that clearly answer the question being asked. One page that says "we build ponds, waterfalls, fountains and do maintenance" answers nothing well. A separate page for each service, written in plain language, with photos of your own work and the questions homeowners actually ask, answers everything. Add a page for each town you serve. Write the blog post about why the water turned green in July. Over time, Google starts to treat you as the authority on water features in your area, and that is worth more than any ad budget.

Your website has one job. Get the call. Put your phone number at the top of every page. Make it tappable. Keep your contact form to three fields. Show your actual work, not stock photos of someone else's pond in a climate you have never built in. Every extra click between a homeowner and your phone

number can cost you potential calls.

Reviews are content. A homeowner who reads a review that says "they built the waterfall in Sanford that my neighbors keep asking about" just learned where you work, what you build and that people like it. Ask for specific reviews. Then quote them on your service pages.

You do not need to do all of it this winter. The builders who got the most out of the audits were not the ones with the longest to-do list. They were the ones who picked the one or two changes that would matter most and committed to them. That is the whole point of an audit. It tells you where to start.

Where We Go From Here

Now that this year's retreat is complete, we are excited to keep deepening the resources and the support we offer when we are not all gathered in one place. Like our attendees, we are fired up about our next steps.

> *"I'm grateful to be in a room with you all. To be in an industry with people with the same passions is amazing. BUT to be in the same room with these people who truly want to help each other be better is truly heartfelt. Thank you all for sharing yourselves."*
>
> *— George Mihalchick, Ponds By George*

The biggest one is the launch of the PondPros ToolBox, an extension of the PondPros directory.

The PondPros directory is a comprehensive directory homeowners can use to find a water feature builder. Businesses can register a listing for free, with paid tiers available. It is one of the biggest projects the PPA has undertaken, built with Jeff and his team at Break The Image.

The new ToolBox is a resource built exclusively for water feature businesses that want to improve their back end, their web presence and their day-to-day operations. It is packed with guides on how to revamp your website so it gets found and gets the call. Right now it is free, and we want every one of you to take advantage of it.

It starts with the same website audit the retreat attendees received. Enter your site, and Jeff personally reviews it and sends back a short, honest report that points you toward the improvements that will pack the biggest punch for your business. No sales pitch. Just the list. From there you can use the dozens of guides in the ToolBox to make the changes yourself or reach out to Jeff if you want a hand.

Because we truly are all about community, we also want your voice to shape what comes next. Visit the PondPros ToolBox and vote on the resources you want developed. The requests already go well beyond web presence. Employee training. Pricing. Hiring your first crew lead. Getting paid on time. Tell us what would help you run your business tighter, and we will build it.



Fireside conversations were the heart of the retreat.

You Are Not Alone

Entrepreneurship can feel solitary. You are the one who signs the checks, answers the 9 p.m. text about a leaking skimmer and lies awake wondering if next season will be as busy as this one.

But you are not alone as a water feature professional. There are hundreds of us gathered in a Facebook group and dozens more who came together in person this September, navigating this solo road together. Become part of the PPA community and experience the support and the resources that are freely available to you.

We will save you a seat by the fire next year.

Become a member for free at pondprofessionalsalliance.org/membership-1

About the Authors



Ana York Arntson is first and foremost, a compassionate homeschooling mom of 4. Overcoming her initial reluctance, she played an integral role in transforming Stonebridge Pond and Waterfall Company in Austin, TX into the success it knows today. As Co-Founder of the Pond Professionals Alliance, she brings her communication skills and passion for building community connections to a larger space.



Jeff Gutowski is Jeff Gutowski is the founder of Break The Image, a digital marketing agency established in 2016 in Belcamp, Maryland, specializing in website development, SEO, Google Ads and lead follow-up systems. While serving a variety of businesses, Jeff focuses on contractors and outdoor living professionals. His approach emphasizes transparent pricing, month-to-month agreements, full reporting access and client ownership of website files, earning trust and business each month. He also freely shares his expertise with business owners, whether they become clients or not. Outside of work, Jeff is a devoted husband and father who works alongside his wife and spends weekends with family at church and in the local community.



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FIVE YEARS OF KOI FEST

Growing a celebration around the hobby



by Lauren Nolan,
Publisher, POND Trade Magazine

If you had driven down the long driveway of the Fitz's Fish Ponds farm five years ago, you would have found the beginnings of an idea: bring koi enthusiasts together, open up the farm, offer some incredible fish and create a fun way to celebrate the end of another pond season.

Drive down that same driveway during Koi Fest today, and it is difficult to believe just how much has changed.

On Aug. 21–22, 2026, the farm in Milford, New Jersey, was transformed for the fifth anniversary of Koi Fest. Show tanks lined the grounds. Vendors and manufacturers filled tents throughout the property. Food trucks served crowds of visitors. Koi collectors gathered around bowls studying potential additions to their ponds. Across the grounds, attendees moved between the Tri-State ZNA Koi Show, the first Koi Fest Goldfish Show, hourly giveaways, live entertainment and a Japanese-style koi auction featuring more than 100 fish.













And everywhere you looked, people were talking about koi.

Some had traveled specifically to compete. Others came looking for their next fish. Pond professionals walked the grounds alongside manufacturers and longtime customers. Families arrived simply wanting to experience the event. Old friends found one another in the crowd, while people who had previously known each other only through the koi community online finally met face to face.

That may be the biggest change Koi Fest has experienced over its first five years.

What began as an event centered around selling koi has become an event centered around the people who love them.

Five Years of Growth

Koi Fest was never created with a five-year master plan.

The original concept was much simpler. Fitz's Fish Ponds had a koi farm filled with Japanese koi and a growing community of customers who shared the same enthusiasm for them. Why not bring everyone together?

The first Koi Fest proved there was an appetite for exactly that.

Each year afterward, another piece was added. Vendors and manufacturers joined the weekend. The Japanese-style koi auction was introduced in 2023. The Tri-State ZNA Koi Show brought competitive koi judging into the festival, and Friday evolved into its own Special Access experience for serious hobbyists and collectors.

By the time planning began for the fifth anniversary, the question was no longer whether Koi Fest could grow. It was how to celebrate everything it had become.

For 2026, Kohaku was selected as the featured koi, while the Japanese festival of Tanabata inspired the theme surrounding the weekend. It was a fitting combination for a milestone year: one of the most iconic koi varieties at the center of an event that continues to evolve around the hobby.

The celebration began Friday with Special Access Day. Scheduled koi-buying tours gave collectors and hobbyists a more personal opportunity to explore the farm, study available koi and talk with the FFP team about breeders, varieties and potential additions to their collections.

Friday evening shifted from koi buying to community building as guests, vendors, industry partners and the FFP team gathered for dinner. It was









a quieter opportunity to reconnect before the pace changed completely the following morning.

Saturday brought an entirely different energy. VIP guests began arriving at 9 a.m., followed by general admission at 10, and the farm quickly transformed into a full-scale festival.

Serious hobbyists studied show fish and scoped out auction favorites, families moved between food and activities, and contractors, manufacturers and pond owners connected throughout the farm. Conversations flowed from vendor booths to show tanks to lunch, creating a mix of industry, hobby and community that has become distinctly Koi Fest.

Even a hot-air balloon became part of the fifth-anniversary scene.

The fish may have brought everyone to the farm, but the connections happening around them became just as much a part of the event.

At the Center of It All: The Fish

Despite everything happening around the farm, the heart of Koi Fest remained exactly where it started: with the fish.

The Tri-State ZNA Koi Show once again brought serious competition to the weekend, with entrants presenting koi across multiple varieties and size classes.

For experienced hobbyists, it was an opportunity to compete and compare fish. For newcomers, seeing high-quality koi side by side offered a crash course in conformation, skin quality, color and pattern — and a chance to begin understanding why one fish might stand apart from another.

For the fifth anniversary, that experience expanded beyond koi with the addition of the first Koi Fest Goldfish Show.

Twenty-four tanks brought another branch of the ornamental-fish hobby into the festival, showcasing varieties including Ranchu, Oranda, Ryukin, Veiltail and Butterfly goldfish. For many attendees, it was also an introduction to the complexity of competitive goldfish and the characteristics that distinguish one variety from another.

The crossover happened naturally. Koi enthusiasts stopped to look at goldfish. Goldfish hobbyists explored the koi show. Aquarium hobbyists found themselves in pond conversations.

Sometimes expanding a hobby does not mean moving away from its roots. It simply means giving someone another doorway into it.

Then came one of the most anticipated parts of the weekend — the Japanese-style koi auction.

Introduced at Koi Fest in 2023, the auction has quickly become one of the event's signature experiences. For 2026, more than 100 koi were prepared for bidding, including tosai, nisai and sansai representing different varieties, breeders, sizes and price points.

As soon as the auction began, the energy changed. Fish were presented, paddles went up and friendly competition took over.

Some attendees arrived knowing exactly which koi they wanted.

Others had absolutely no intention of buying another fish.

Those people did not always leave empty-handed.

That unpredictability is part of what makes the auction fun. Even people who never place a bid can find themselves invested in watching a particular fish move from its opening price to its final sale.

The 2026 auction generated extreme excitement, demonstrating how significant this part of Koi Fest has become in only a few years.

More Than a Koi Show

Hourly giveaways kept the festival moving throughout Saturday, with prizes ranging from koi and fish food to filtration equipment, aquatic plants and pond products contributed by participating manufacturers.

At 4 p.m. came the giveaway everyone had been waiting for: a koi-buying trip to Japan. This now tradition is the ultimate way to celebrate the passion of koi.

For many hobbyists, traveling to Japan and visiting the breeders responsible for the fish in their ponds is a bucket-list experience.

The activities surrounding the fish also make Koi Fest accessible to people at every level of the hobby. Someone might arrive because a family member loves koi and leave having watched competitive judging, discovered a new goldfish variety, learned something from a manufacturer or gotten caught up in the excitement of the auction.

That ability to bring different interests and experience levels together has become an important part of what Koi Fest is.

What Five Years Built

Attendees see the finished product: tents, tanks, koi, food trucks, vendors,





















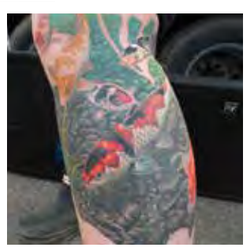
























signs, show areas and an auction ready to begin.

They do not see the months behind it.

Koi Fest touches nearly every part of Fitz's Fish Ponds, from selecting and preparing fish to coordinating vendors, sponsors, food, parking, tours, tanks, giveaways, dinners and guest lists.

Then event weekend arrives, and inevitably, something changes. Weather shifts. Schedules move. Deliveries arrive late. Equipment needs attention. A vendor needs help. A fish needs care.

Pulling it all together requires a team capable of adapting by the hour. It is that work behind the scenes that allows the event to feel effortless once the gates open.

By late Saturday afternoon, the daytime festival began to wind down, but Koi Fest was not over.

As vendors started packing displays and the crowds began to thin, the FFP team shifted gears again, transitioning the farm from a day of shows, auctions and activities into an evening of celebration.

For the first time, the Goldfish Show awards banquet was held alongside the Tri-State ZNA Koi Show banquet, bringing both sides of the competitive fish community together to recognize the weekend's winners. After a full day around the show tanks, attendees gathered once more to celebrate the exhibitors and the koi and goldfish that stood out among the competition.

It was a fitting conclusion to a weekend that had brought so many different corners of the hobby together.

And even when the awards are over and most guests have headed home, Koi Fest never seems to end right away.

There are always a few who stay behind.

The last ones standing gather around the fire, talking about the weekend, laughing about the moments that did not go exactly according to plan and reminiscing about how much the event has changed. Inevitably, the conversation turns to what



comes next. New ideas are tossed around. Plans begin taking shape.

Someone starts a sentence with, "Next year, what if we…"

In many ways, that is where the next Koi Fest begins.

Five years ago, Koi Fest started with a simple idea: bring people together around koi.

The crowds are larger now. There are more vendors, more fish, more competitions, more activities and considerably more moving pieces behind the scenes.

But the reason people keep coming back has remained remarkably simple.

They love the fish. They love the hobby. And somewhere along the way, the people who love them became a community.

Maybe that is the best measure of what Koi Fest has built in its first five years: long after the tanks begin to empty and the crowds head home, there are still people gathered around the fire, talking about koi and already dreaming about next year.







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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EasyPRO Pond Products

Innovation, Quality, Experience

Featured Project

Custom Recreational Swim Pond, North Dumfries
Quiet Nature, Ontario, CA

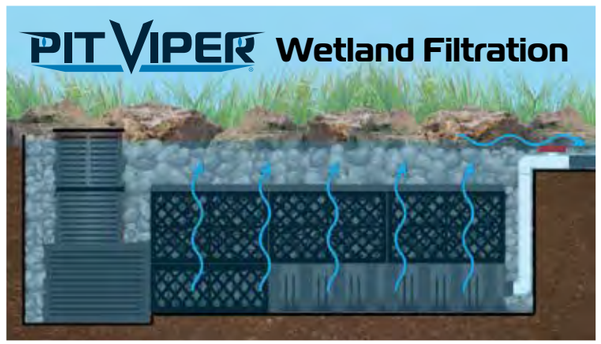
Derek Lippert, owner of Quiet Nature in Ontario, trusted EasyPro's **Pit Viper® Wetland Filtration System** for this swim pond.
Its modular design fit the available space and Derek knew its biological filtration would keep the water clear for years to come.

Build Summer 2026



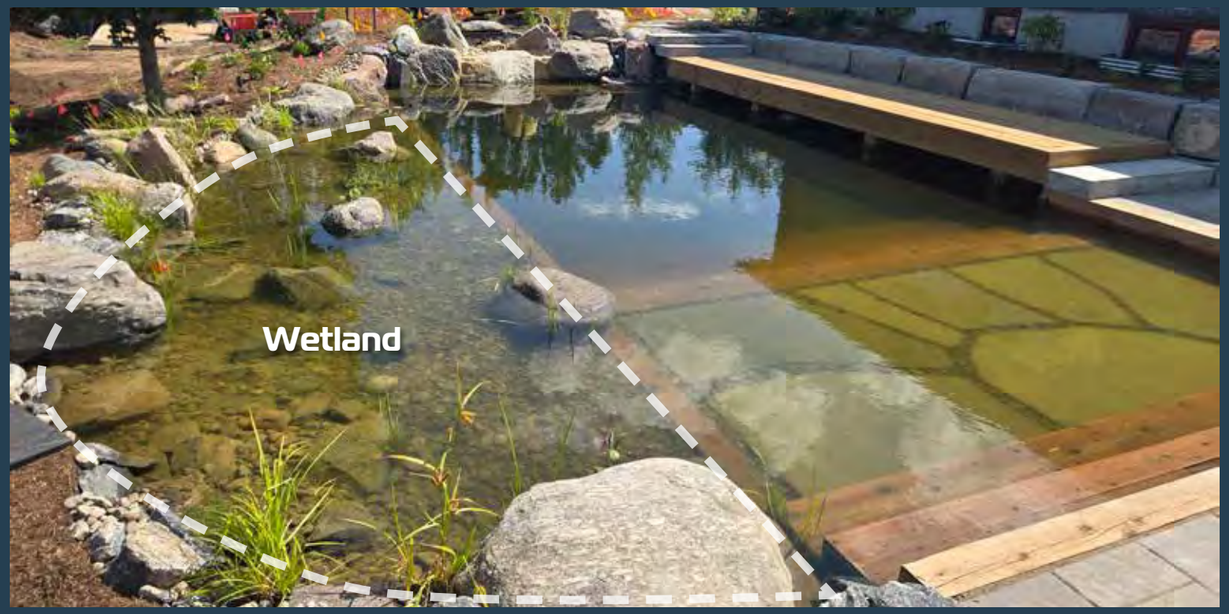






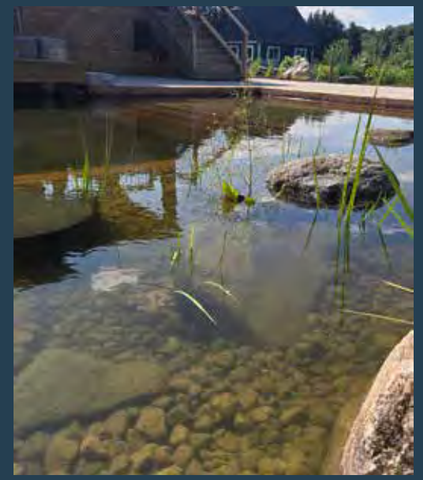
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From Quiet Nature

"EasyPro as a company has been great to work with. Very responsive. I was impressed with the Pit Viper System with EasyBog Cubes ever since we had some of our crew join the PPA build in Oklahoma.
It's easy to install and I love the pre-filled bog cubes for providing massive amounts of filtration in a relatively tight space. The 2.0 version is even more compact which we appreciate. Much better than filling with tons and tons of stone. Combined with our external filtration it has provided incredible water clarity." *Derek Lippert*



Water Features from Above



An aerial view of this Lynch Landscape project highlights the crew's precision and attention to detail. From above, the carefully aligned lines and thoughtful layout reveal the craftsmanship behind a cohesive design that offers an entirely different perspective from the ground.

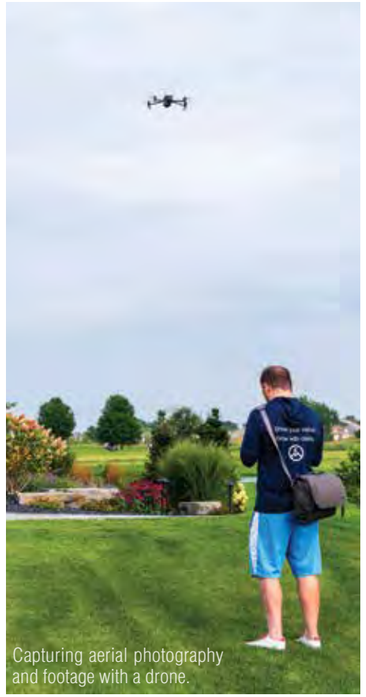


Getting the shot (and staying legal) when you fly a drone

by Chris Major,
CM Images, LLC

Capturing a water feature project looks great from a lot of angles, but especially from the sky. An elevated view highlights the scope of the work and gives a perspective that's just as interesting as ground level, sometimes more. There's a real opportunity here to get great footage and images of the water feature you built. There are also a few hidden pitfalls worth considering before you casually send the drone up.

The first part of this is about getting the shot right. The second part is about something a lot of contractors haven't thought through: whether the person flying that drone is legally allowed to be doing it for money.



Capturing aerial photography and footage with a drone.

Part One: Getting the Shot, Especially Over Water

Don't overthink this part. Some of the best water feature shots come from just getting the drone up and paying attention to a few basics, not from treating every flight like a film shoot.

Time of day is worth thinking about, mainly because of glare and reflection. Water acts like a mirror, and depending on the angle of the sun, that mirror either works for you or against you. Midday sun tends to bounce straight back into the lens. Earlier or later in the day, the light sits at an angle that gives the water color and depth instead of just glare. It's not something to stress over, just something to keep in mind when you're picking a time to fly.



A polarizer or ND filter helps here too, and it's worth having one in the case. It cuts glare off the water's surface and can pull out reflection and color you'd otherwise lose. Every setup behaves a little differently depending on the light and the water itself, so it's worth experimenting rather than assuming one filter setting will work every time.

On altitude, grab your wide establishing shot from up high, but don't stop there. Some of the strongest footage comes from getting closer than people expect, whether that's dropping altitude or using a tighter zoom if your drone has one. The careful nuance of a waterfall or stream bed built by hand loses its detail from 100 feet or higher. Getting in close enough to show the stonework and the water movement together tells a different story than the high-altitude overhead view, and it might be the shot that actually sells the craftsmanship.

Movement matters, and the key to great video is keeping it slow throughout the flight, not just when you're closing in on the feature. A slow, steady move from a wide shot of the property into a closer pass over the water reads as intentional. Using something already on the property — a mature tree, a pergola, the corner of the house — to build the reveal makes it even better. Try orbiting slowly around a tree while gradually rotating the camera down toward the water feature. Hiding the payoff behind something for a beat creates tension, and revealing it creates release, which is a far more interesting shot than just flying straight at the feature. Quick or jerky movement could read as amateur no matter how nice the project might be.

As for instability, in my experience the drone can handle almost anything reasonable, so shaky footage from wind usually isn't the real problem. The real problem is that windy or unpredictable conditions raise the odds of something going wrong, a lost signal, a miscalculated distance, a crash. And that's where this stops being a conversation about getting a good shot and starts being a conversation about what happens if it goes bad.







These aerial views capture the property from different angles and heights, using soft, late-day light to showcase the expansive landscape, intricate stonework and craftsmanship. This sweeping waterfront setting of this private residence along Grand Traverse Bay in Traverse City, Michigan, was designed and built by Flaska Landscaping.

Part Two: The Legal Side Nobody Wants to Talk About

I doubt any landscape company is putting "our guy has a Part 107" on their website or Instagram bio. That's not really the issue. The issue is more common than that. More than likely, someone on staff owns a drone and when the company needs footage, that person gets handed the controls. It seems harmless. It's often genuinely helpful in the moment. But it means the company is now exposing itself, and that employee, to liability neither of them may realize they're carrying.

The FAA's rule is that if a drone flight serves your business in any way, even if nobody paid you directly for that specific flight, it counts as commercial operation. A promotional video for your own company counts. A photo for your own website counts. Legally flying for that purpose requires a Part 107 Remote Pilot Certificate.

For a long time, enforcement was inconsistent enough that a lot of people treated this as a formality. That's shifting. The FAA has strengthened its enforcement approach to unsafe or unauthorized drone operations. I won't bury this in a wall of numbers, but it's worth knowing that violations can result in significant civil penalties. And because a single flight can involve multiple violations, the consequences can add up quickly.



The important takeaway is that not having a Part 107 certificate doesn't shield you from any of this. It just means that if something goes wrong, the company has no credential to point to and no proof that whoever was flying actually knew the airspace rules, the restrictions or what they were doing up there.

I think about it the same way I think about a CDL. You don't need one to drive a truck around your own job sites, until you do. Most days, nothing happens and nobody checks. But if you get pulled into a situation where it matters and you don't have it, that's a real headache (and then some) for the driver and the company both. Flying a drone commercially works the same way. The requirement isn't the govern-

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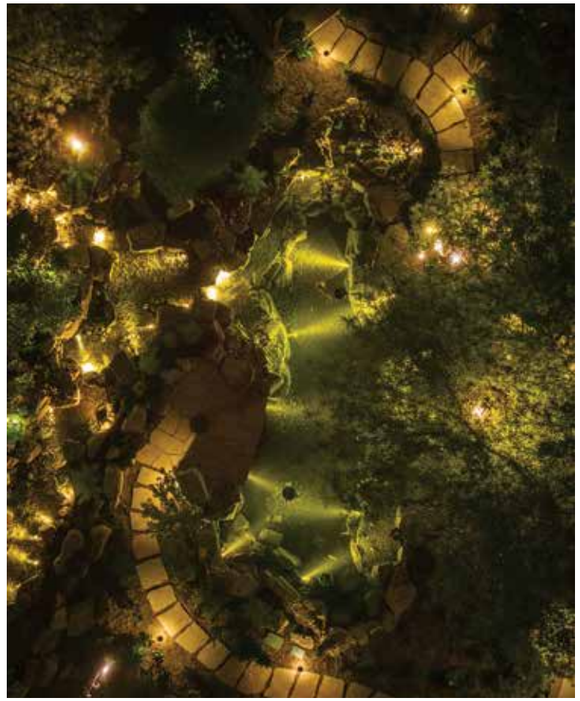
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Day and night drone photography captures two perspectives of the same water feature, revealing how natural light and nighttime illumination transform the landscape in this stunning water feature by Hiner Outdoor Livin

ment overreaching into a hobby. It's there because the skies need to stay safe for everyone using them, and because a business is better protected when the person flying for them has actual training behind them instead of a few YouTube videos watched the night before.

Common Pitfalls, Licensed or Not

Even trained pilots get complacent. A few mistakes come up again and again in FAA enforcement cases and general drone incidents:

- Flying without checking for temporary flight restrictions or other airspace restrictions
- Flying into restricted airspace, most often near airports, without proper authorization
- Flying in adverse weather conditions, high wind, low visibility or storms rolling in
- Flying over people without understanding and following the applicable FAA requirements
- Ignoring Remote ID requirements

None of these require bad intentions. Most of them come down to not checking something that takes two minutes to look up before a flight. That's exactly the kind of knowledge a Part 107 course drills into you, and exactly the kind of thing an untrained pilot has little reason to know to check.

What to Look For if You Hire It Out

If getting someone on staff certified isn't realistic right now, hiring a licensed pilot is your option, but not every drone operator with a website is actually qualified to work on a job site that needs to feature your landscape work.

Start by asking to see the Part 107 certificate itself, not just a mention of it. It's a simple ask and any legitimate pilot will have it ready. Beyond that, ask about insurance. A pilot carrying liability coverage specific to drone operations is protecting your business as much as their own if something goes wrong on your property.

Experience with the specific kind of site matters too. Flying over an open field is a different job than flying near power lines, close to a home or around a crew that's actively working. Ask whether they've shot job sites like yours before, and ask how they handle safety around people and structures while flying. A pilot who takes that question seriously and has a real answer, not just "I'm careful," is usually the one worth hiring.

The last thing worth checking is whether they know the airspace restrictions in your area. Some job sites sit closer to airports or controlled airspace than people realize, and a pilot who can speak to that without hesitation has actually done this work before.





Commissioned by U.K.-based Alitex Glasshouses, these aerial images showcase a custom glass greenhouse set within an expansive estate. The overhead perspective highlights the structure's design and its relationship to the surrounding landscape.

What to Look For if You Want to Get Licensed Yourself

Getting a Part 107 certificate takes real study, but it doesn't require flight hours or a pilot's license to start. It comes down to passing the FAA's Aeronautical Knowledge Test, a 60-question exam that covers a lot of the same ground as manned aircraft training, including reading sectional charts, airspace classifications, weather patterns and aviation terminology most people have never had a reason to learn. It's not a rubber stamp. You're being tested on some of the same material a plane pilot needs to know.

Most people study on their own using an online prep course, and a solid one will run somewhere in the range of a hundred to a few hundred dollars, plus a testing fee to sit for the exam at an approved center. Plan on a few weeks of focused study, longer if you're fitting it around a full workload. It's a real exam, not a formality, but it's also built to be passable by someone without an aviation background if they put in the study time.

Once you pass, the certificate does not expire, but pilots must complete periodic recurrent training through the FAA to maintain currency rather than sitting for the full exam again. For a company that plans to keep shooting its own aerial footage long term, it's a one-time investment that pays for itself the first time it keeps you out of a prickly conversation with the FAA.

If drone footage is part of how you market your work, especially something as visually striking as a water feature, the unique perspective is worth chasing. As a business owner, you really have two paths: get someone on your team certified, or hire it out to someone who already is. The upside of good aerial footage is real. So is the exposure if you skip the part that keeps you legal while getting it.

With that all said, take to the skies safely and capture some beautiful watershape images.

All photographs utilized for this article were captured by Chris Major, of CM Images, LLC. Disclaimer: the advice in this article is not legal advice, just what I've learned holding a Part 107 myself. If you're unsure where you stand, the FAA's website and a conversation with an attorney are worth the time.

About the Author

Chris Major is a photographer and brand strategist who works with pond builders and water artisans to help them present their work with clarity and purpose. Drawing from a background in the landscape industry and award-winning photography, he focuses on visual storytelling that highlights craftsmanship, builds credibility, and attracts the right clients.



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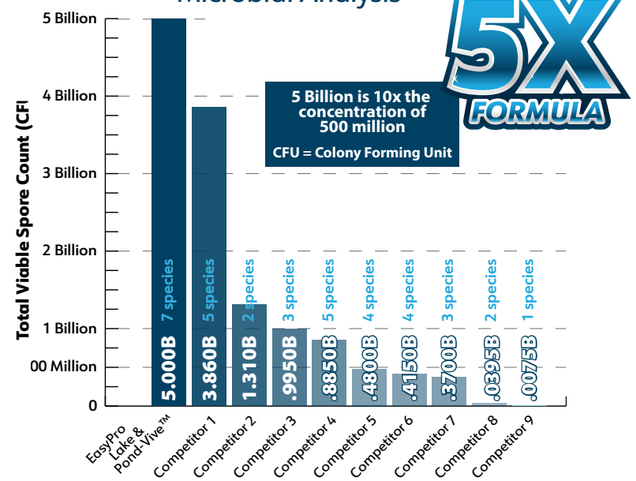
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GOLDFISH SHOWS *on the* RISE

How koi partnerships and industry events are helping goldfish shows expand their reach

by Gary Hater, Joshua McWilliams, & Bryson Foss,

Good news for the pond trade: Goldfish shows are on the upswing. Established events are filling their available exhibition space, new shows are attracting enthusiastic first-year participation, and partnerships with koi clubs and pond retailers are introducing more people to the depth of the modern goldfish hobby.

The strongest examples do more than place attractive fish in tanks. They create a complete weekend experience built around competition, education, retail activity and community. Visitors can see excellent adult fish and promising young specimens, learn what separates an exceptional fish from an average one, purchase new stock and, in some cases, enter a fish bought at the event directly into the show.

A Broader Picture of the Goldfish Hobby

For many pond owners, the word goldfish still brings to mind a limited selection of familiar orange fish. A well-planned show quickly





Greater Louisville Koi and Goldfish Show winners — Left: Grand Champion Black and White Oranda, exhibited by Stephanie Virg. Center: Reserve Grand Champion Calico Pearlscale, exhibited by Joshua McWilliams. Right: Baby Champion Calico Yuan Bao, exhibited by Joshua McWilliams.

changes that perception. Modern North American events commonly offer 10 to 14 competitive classes and may present more than 20 varieties. Fish are generally divided between adults over 3 inches and young fish under 3 inches, allowing mature specimens and the next generation to compete on an appropriate stage.

The range can be remarkable. Pond varieties may include Bristol shubunkins, wakin, watonai, commons and tamasaba, along with rarities such as lemon-yellow commons, exceptional watonai and newer color expressions such as kirin tamasaba. Fancy classes bring together ranchu, oranda, ryukin, veiltails, telescope varieties, pearlscales and other specialized forms. The best examples can look as though they have been lifted from a glossy Asian goldfish book: large, balanced, intensely colored and expertly conditioned.

North American show structures borrow useful elements from other established animal exhibitions, including rabbit and dog shows. Major awards may include Grand Champion, Reserve Grand Champion, Baby Champion, Reserve Baby Champion, the Goldfish Council Award, Most Unique and honors for pond varieties. The Goldfish Council's 500-point evaluation system gives judges a consistent framework for assessing quality. Various aspects of a fish's appearance, condition and deportment are assigned weighted values specific to each variety and used to evaluate the goldfish.

Why Goldfish and Koi Belong Together

Goldfish and koi audiences already overlap. Both value water quality, filtration, nutrition, health, color, conformation and the satisfaction of raising fish to their potential. Yet goldfish add a different scale and visual experience to an event. Their smaller exhibition footprint allows a club, retailer or expo to introduce a substantial show without requiring the space or logistics of a second full koi competition.

For koi clubs, a goldfish division broadens the attraction for families, aquarium keepers and pond owners who may not yet be ready for koi. For retailers, the show floor becomes both a classroom and a marketplace. Customers learn to recognize quality while standing only steps away from fish, food, equipment and expert advice. For goldfish organizations, a koi partnership supplies an established audience, experienced volunteers and event infrastructure. Each group brings something the other can use.





Greater Louisville Koi and Goldfish Show — Left: Goldfish on display at the Greater Louisville Koi and Goldfish Show. Right: Outdoor show tanks and exhibition tents at night.





Greater Louisville Koi and Goldfish Show — Left: Reserve Baby Granite Thai Ranchu, exhibited by Claire Beck. Center: TGC Champion Lemon Common Goldfish, exhibited by Gary Hater. Right: Judge Chip Autry and head writer Joshua McWilliams.

Louisville: An Established Koi-and-Goldfish Partnership

The 2026 Greater Louisville Koi and Goldfish Show demonstrates the value of adding goldfish competition to an established koi event. The show drew 75 goldfish entries and featured strong competition across oranda, ranchu/lionhead, ryukin, pearlscale, eye-growth, single-tail, wakin/jikin and special-variety classes.

TGC-certified judge Chip Autry evaluated the field, with Joshua McWilliams, Gary Hater and Claire Beck supporting benching and show operations. Stephanie Virg earned Grand Champion with an oranda, Joshua McWilliams received Reserve Grand Champion with a calico pearlscale, and Gary Hater earned the Goldfish Council Award with a lemon-colored common. The winners reinforced an important lesson for the public: Quality is not confined to one fashionable variety. A beautifully conditioned pond fish can stand alongside the finest fancy goldfish.

Louisville's model gives koi-show visitors another reason to linger, learn and return. It also provides goldfish exhibitors with an established venue and connects two communities that share many of the same husbandry concerns. The result is a fuller ornamental-fish event without forcing either hobby to give up its identity.

Ohio Goldfish Palooza IV: A Destination Event

Ohio Goldfish Palooza IV represents the stand-alone retail-hosted model at a much larger scale. Held at Ohio Koi & Goldfish in Sunbury, Ohio, and presented in partnership with the Goldfish Council, the 2026 event filled all 50 show tanks with 194 entries. Exhibitors traveled from across the United States and Canada, and the fish represented bloodlines with origins around the world. With 194 entries, the event ranked among the largest stand-alone goldfish shows in the United States in 2026.

TGC-certified judge Dan Young of Indiana evaluated a remarkably deep field, with Tim Asbill serving as show writer and apprentice judge. Ranchu formed the largest class, with more than 55 entries, while oranda, veiltail and ryukin/tamasaba were also strongly represented. Joshua McWilliams earned Grand Champion with an adult tricolor oranda. Bryan Rhodes received the Goldfish Council Award with a bronze veiltail, and Gary Hater earned Reserve Grand Champion with a tiger ranchu. Kelly Dixon captured both Baby Champion and Reserve Baby Champion.






Ohio Goldfish Palooza IV — Left: Goldfish display tanks set up for the Ohio Goldfish Palooza. Center: Goldfish Show event banner. Right: Attendees viewing goldfish exhibits during the show.







Custom art pieces served as awards for the goldfish show at Ohio Koi's Goldfish Palooza, adding a creative touch to the competition.

Palooza's value extended well beyond the awards. Ohio Koi & Goldfish hosted a Goldfish Keepers Appreciation Sale, and TGC judges served as personal shoppers to help visitors evaluate potential purchases. Educational seminars by Gary Hater and Joshua McWilliams gave beginners and experienced keepers an approachable place to discuss selection, care, breeding and showing. A bowl sale supported the event while helping attendees take home new fish.

The partnership works because each participant invests in the full experience. Hosts Todd and Amy Elliott and the Ohio Koi & Goldfish team provide the facility, tank storage and retail environment. Sponsors, donors and volunteers support awards, meals, setup, benching, sales, teardown and the many unseen tasks required to manage nearly 200 live entries. The show is a competition, but it is also a retail weekend, an educational program and a community gathering.

Koi Fest: A Goldfish First at a Koi Tradition

The inaugural Fitz's Fish Ponds/TGC Goldfish Show demonstrated what can happen when a pond-industry business builds a show experience with intention. Held alongside the fifth annual Koi Fest, which welcomed more than 3,000 attendees, the competition introduced thousands of visitors to the diversity and beauty of fancy goldfish. Through a new partnership with the Goldfish Council (TGC), Fitz's Fish Ponds established a professionally judged competition designed to elevate goldfish exhibitions to the same caliber as traditional koi shows and lay the foundation for years of growth.

Recognizing that many Koi Fest visitors would be encountering fancy goldfish for the first time, the Fitz's team worked to create a professional presentation that showcased the fish at their best. Custom-built stands positioned tanks at a comfortable viewing height, while blue-painted backs and bottoms accentuated the striking colors and forms of the fish. Targeted overhead lighting and a centralized air manifold completed the display, creating a consistent, professional exhibition beneath a large event tent.





Left: Reserve Grand Champion won by Herbert Fritch - Right: Grand Champion won by Brittany Mockler at Koi Fest 2026.

The show received 51 entries, filling all 20 available tanks. The competition attracted both experienced hobbyists and first-time exhibitors, with many participants purchasing show-ready fish directly from Fitz's Fancies, Fitz's Fish Ponds' new fancy goldfish division, during the event. That combination was especially meaningful for the pond trade. Visitors could purchase a fish, learn how it compared with others of its variety and immediately take their first steps toward becoming competitive exhibitors.



Goldfish show display tanks at the First Annual Goldfish Show at Fitz's Fish Ponds' Koi Fest 2026.

TGC-certified judge Rob Crosby evaluated a competitive field, with oranda and ranchu producing the largest classes. Most entries were at least 4 inches long, creating a particularly deep adult division. Hobbyists rounded out the competition with bubble eyes, telescopes, pearlscales and tamasaba, demonstrating the variety and growing appeal of the goldfish hobby.

Brittany Mockler earned Grand Champion with an impressive tiger oranda, narrowly edging out Herbert Fritch's tiger ryukin, which received Reserve Grand Champion. Michael Weeks earned Baby Champion honors with a blue-base calico oranda.

The sold-out inaugural show demonstrated that thoughtful presentation, passionate hobbyists, available inventory and certified judging can transform an established koi event into an accessible gateway to the goldfish show hobby. More importantly, the partnership between Fitz's Fish Ponds and the Goldfish Council created a



About The Goldfish Council

Founded in 2016, the Goldfish Council (TGC) is a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization dedicated to promoting the keeping, breeding, showing and appreciation of goldfish. Established by passionate hobbyists and amateur breeders, TGC advances the hobby through education, certified judging, competitive show standards, club presentations and an active online community. Its resources cover everything from goldfish care and breeding to the rich history and culture of the hobby.

Learn more at: www.thegoldfishcouncil.org

foundation for continued growth, bringing goldfish keeping to a broader audience while establishing Koi Fest as a destination for both koi and goldfish enthusiasts.

Building a Successful Partnership

These three events vary in size and setting, but they share a practical formula. A successful goldfish component needs a committed host, appropriate tanks and aeration, good lighting, clear show rules, certified judging, healthy fish-handling procedures and volunteers who understand both hospitality and operations. Education and sales should be planned as part of the event — not treated as an afterthought.

Retailers and clubs should also make entry feel approachable. Separating fish by size gives newcomers a realistic place to compete. A broad variety schedule helps pond fish receive the same respect as fancy varieties. Having knowledgeable staff available near the sales tanks helps customers connect what they see in competition with what they might raise at home. When possible, inviting event purchases into the competition creates an immediate bridge between shopper and exhibitor.

Promotion should emphasize the visual range of the hobby. A giant oranda, a refined ranchu and a rare watonai may appeal to different visitors, but together they tell a much more compelling story than any single variety can. Families are drawn to color and movement; serious hobbyists appreciate conformation and rarity; pond professionals gain opportunities to discuss systems, nutrition and long-term care.



Gary Hater, Adam Rachman, Bryson Foss, and Joshua McWilliams receiving awards at the awards ceremony at the 29th Annual Greater Louisville Koi & Goldfish Show.

A Growing Opportunity for the Pond Trade

The current show season generally runs from April through late August, creating multiple opportunities for pond businesses and koi organizations to participate. The recent results are encouraging: 75 entries alongside an established Louisville koi show, 51 entries filling a new 20-tank Fitz's event and 194 entries filling all 50 tanks at Ohio Goldfish Palooza IV.

Those numbers matter, but the larger opportunity is what happens around them. Goldfish shows give customers a reason to travel, spend time at a venue, compare fish, ask better questions and purchase with greater confidence. They help breeders and exhibitors connect with the public. They give koi clubs additional content and new participants. Most importantly, they demonstrate that the goldfish side of the pond hobby is diverse, sophisticated and growing.

For a koi club or pond retailer considering a partnership, the invitation is simple: Start with the space and resources you have, work with an experienced goldfish organization and build an event that combines excellent fish with education and access. The first show may begin with 20 tanks. With the right partnership, it may not stay that size for long.

About the Authors



Bryson Foss is a lifelong enthusiast and breeder of fancy goldfish. He has turned his passion for aquatic life into a driving force behind the first-ever Goldfish Show at Koi Fest 2026. His dedication to the hobby, combined with his commitment to Fitz's Fish Ponds, played an instrumental role in bringing the event to life and expanding the festival's celebration of ornamental fishkeeping. When he's not overseeing Tennessee operations or sharing his knowledge with fellow hobbyists, Bryson enjoys the finer things in life — koi and goldfish, of course.

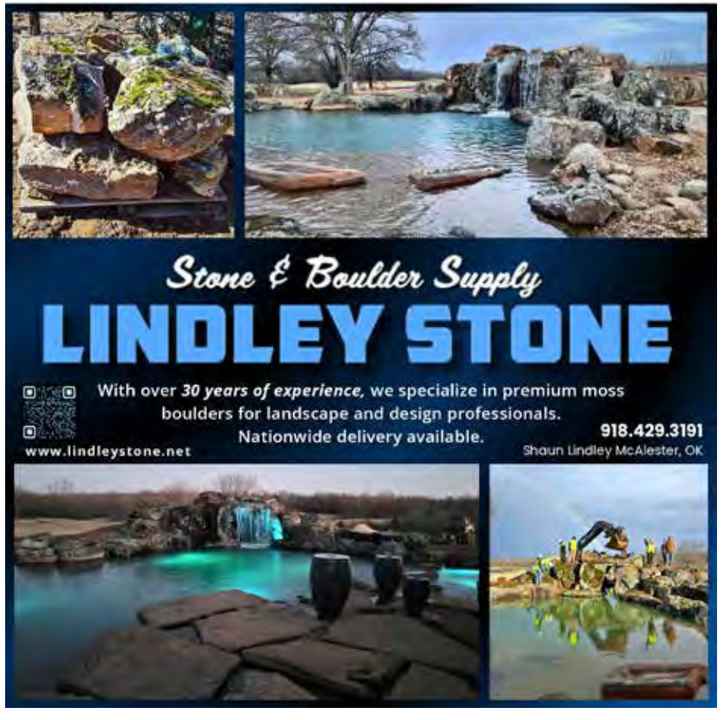


Joshua McWilliams is a Cincinnati-based Amazon Air operations manager and certified goldfish judge since 2016. His passion for breeding and showing animals began in 4-H and Future Farmers of America. A longtime Goldfish Council leader with several executive roles, he breeds butterfly telescopes, eggfish, frogheads, lionheads and fantails, and participates in the Blue Egg Phoenix preservation project. He also enjoys breeding and showing rabbits, gardening and attending goldfish and koi shows nationwide.



Gary Hater is a retired professional biologist whose career focused on water quality, environmental research and wastewater treatment. An aquarium hobbyist since the 1960s, he began specializing in goldfish in the 1980s and has since bred more than 20 varieties, maintaining rare lines such as Philadelphia veiltails, English veiltails, Bristol shubunkins and broadtail moors for decades. A founding member and first president of the Goldfish Council, Gary has been instrumental in advancing goldfish breeding, education and appreciation. Based in Cincinnati, Ohio, he maintains an extensive collection of indoor tanks and outdoor ponds. Outside the hobby, he enjoys fishing, beekeeping, gardening and chestnut farming.





WHERE *Water Gardeners* GATHER

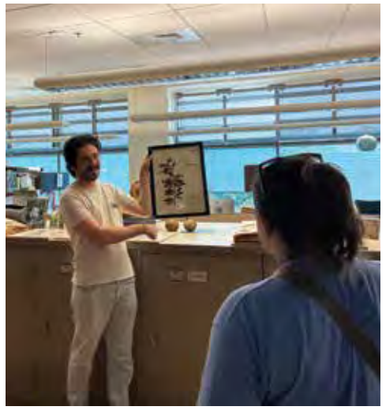


The 2026 IWGS Symposium in St. Louis

by Julie Rechtien,
Chalily

Each year, the International Waterlily & Water Gardening Society (IWGS) brings together a global community of growers, researchers, hobbyists and plant enthusiasts who share a passion for aquatic plants and the ponds they call home.

In August, the annual symposium came to St. Louis. It's a fitting location for a water gardening gathering. For more than a century, St. Louis has been a center of aquatic plant research, home to the hybridizers and horticulturists who shaped the water lilies grown in ponds and gardens around the world today.





Left: Viewing plant specimens collected in the field at the Peter H. Raven Library Right: Water Gardeners gather around the Giant Victoria Water Lilies at Missouri Botanical Garden. - Bottom: Tower Grove Park's lily ponds date from the 1880s and display aquatic plants for summer visitors to enjoy.

St. Louis also has a long-standing connection to the IWGS. The second annual symposium was held here in 1986, during IWGS' early years, when the water gardening community was first beginning to take shape.

Forty years of education, research and conservation later, returning to St. Louis offered an opportunity to celebrate how far the community has come, and to reconnect with the friendships, memories and shared history that define it.

Behind the Scenes at Missouri Botanical Garden

Missouri Botanical Garden, recently highlighted by The New York Times as one of America's great urban botanical gardens, was the backdrop for the symposium's first full day.

Our visit did not begin at the 79-acre garden, but down the street, at the Peter H. Raven Library, home to 280,000 items, including books, botanical artwork, field books, photographs, maps and more. The library supports the work of Missouri Botanical Garden's scientists, students and researchers from all over the world and is vital to the garden's mission "to discover and share knowledge about plants and their environment, in order to preserve and enrich life."

We were welcomed by Dr. Lúcia G. Lohmann, an internationally recognized botanist who serves as the garden's eighth president and director. IWGS President Suzanne Boom, a senior horticulturist at Longwood Gardens, where she oversees the aquatics collection, then officially opened the symposium.

Then, eager to explore, we moved through the library, viewing rare books, the latest scanning technology, paper restoration and a look at the practical uses of aquatic plants, from lotus seed snacks to taro tubers to hats woven from cattail plants.

We got a peek at specimens collected in the field, including a fern collected by Charles Darwin and another collected by Jane Goodall. The room filled with oohs and ahhs.

And just like that, the week was underway.



From the Library to the Lily Pools

Presentations from Bob Stolzberg and Derek Lyle traced the history of water lily cultivation in St. Louis from James Gurney's first Victoria flowering at the garden in 1894 through the hybridization work of George H. Pring, including his varieties growing in the reflecting pools today. With 130 years of water lily history in our heads, we were ready to see the plants.

We made the short trip to the garden itself, where we walked past pools of water lilies in bloom on our way to our next stop. Luckily lunch was waiting, or we might have lost a few water gardeners!

The afternoon's education sessions featured a presentation by Zijun Li, who has spent 15 years collecting and hybridizing water lilies, on the genetic patterns of Nymphaea mexicana. Domonick Gravine of Redleaf Exotics shared the origins, culture and hybridization of Nepenthes and tropical pitcher plants, passing around specimens for the group to examine up close.

Then we moved outside, where Greta Berg, Claire Krofft and Derek Lyle waded into the giant Victoria water lily pond to present on the garden's aquatic displays and their participation in the Waterlily Weigh-Off. The competition, which was accepting entries that same week as the

symposium, invites growers around the world to see how much their giant Victoria leaves hold.

After a cloudy morning, the sun came out just as the group spread out to explore. Some made their way to the production greenhouses, not open to the public, where the garden's collection of Nymphaea species and hybrids is propagated and maintained. Others wandered the expansive public gardens in peak summer bloom.

A City of Water Gardens

If our first day was all about water gardening as an institution, the second showcased water gardening in the community.

The morning began at the Piper Palm House in Tower Grove Park. Built in 1878, it is the oldest greenhouse west of the Mississippi River, originally constructed to overwinter the park's collection of tropical plants. The conservatory sits on an open-air plaza overlooking a set of historic lily ponds that offer a natural contrast to the manicured reflecting pools at Missouri Botanical Garden the day before.

Inside the greenhouse, Danny Cox of Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden offered pond construction and design advice from a public horticulture perspective. Neil Eisenberger presented his work on the Tower Grove Park East Stream Restoration Project, a stream daylighting intervention that transformed buried drainage infrastructure into a functioning ecological corridor.

Dr. John J. Cho, professor emeritus of plant pathology at the University of Hawaii, closed the morning with a presentation on Colocasia esculenta, tracing its origins as a food crop through his ornamental breeding program, which has produced more than 17 patented cultivars under the Royal Hawaiian Colocasia label.

Several of his varieties were growing in the ponds right outside.

We made our way across the city through the afternoon, stopping at





Top: The group visits Francis Park's Lily pond, which is planted and maintained by the localcommunity.
Bottom: Admiring the 250,000 gallon shark exhibit at the St. Louis Aquarium.

Francis Park, where a community-maintained lily pond offers another reminder that water gardening runs deep in this city, before heading to the St. Louis Aquarium at Union Station for a behind-the-scenes tour.

For a group that spends its days managing aquatic plant environments, the aquarium offered an unexpected parallel. The pump room alone, a massive system keeping thousands of gallons of freshwater and marine habitats healthy, was a reminder that water, in any context, demands respect.

An Evening by the Pond

After a day full of talks, tours and massive fish tanks, we kicked back at the home of Chris and Tara Siewing. Chris is the Aquascape-certified contractor behind Nature's Re-Creations, which specializes in naturalistic water feature design. His family's home pond, Fox Mountain Falls, is something to behold: 120 by 60 feet, more than 8 feet deep, built from more than 385 tons of weathered limestone boulders, with a custom stone bluff, a shallow sundeck and a Pondside Pub centered around a 40-foot petrified wood bar.



Mingling at the Pondside Pub, a feature of Nature's Re-Creations' pond: Fox Mountain Falls.

As the sun went down and the pond lights came on, water gardeners from around the world mingled at the water's edge, while three of them felt inspired to jump right in alongside the koi.

Tara summed up the evening best when we thanked her for hosting: "People from all over the world gathering in my backyard?" she said.

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Left: Taking selfies inside a growth chamber at Bayer Crop Sciences. - Right: The group gathers before touring the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center.

From the Garden to the Lab

We spent two days among plants. This one was about where they begin.

The morning began with Harry Hensley, environmental solutions manager at Eco Constructors, making the case for the plants that have always belonged here — native landscapes and plant-based solutions rooted in what the land already knows.

From that conversation, the group set out to see plant science at a very different scale.

Our first stop was Bayer Crop Science, a global life sciences company with a significant St. Louis presence, focused on crop science research, seed development and sustainability.

The afternoon brought a visit to the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, a world-renowned independent nonprofit dedicated to plant biology, crop improvement and global food security.

Both facilities offered a rare look behind the curtain: the growth chambers, the specialized technology and the scale of research that happens long before a plant reaches a grower.

The Jewel Box

The symposium closed with a banquet at the Jewel Box, a 1936 Art Deco conservatory whose 50-foot glass walls catch light in a way that makes it one of the most distinctive structures in Forest Park, which covers 1,293 acres (500 more than New York City's Central Park).

Outside the Jewel Box, the St. Louis Water Garden Society maintains and funds three separate pond areas holding 39 varieties of aquatic plants, including perennial water lilies, annual day- and night-bloomers and, of course, a Victoria 'Longwood Hybrid' at the center.

On this evening, they were spectacular.

We gathered around the ponds to watch the St. Louis Water Garden Society film its entry for the annual Waterlily Weigh-Off (its giant Victoria leaf held 49 pounds), a fitting bookend to a week that had buzzed with the excitement of the competition.

Inside, the evening unfolded slowly and warmly. After the sun went down, a bowl was passed around the tables carrying freshly cut Victoria blooms from the ponds outside, a first-day bloom, white and fragrant with its signature scent of butterscotch, alongside a second-day bloom, turned pink.

The mood was celebratory, reminiscing about past symposiums and catching up on the conversations the week had started, until it was interrupted, gloriously, by a surprise taiko drumming performance that filled the greenhouse and had everyone reaching for their phones.



The Jewel Box lily ponds, maintained and funded by the St. Louis Water Garden Society.

The People Behind the Plants

Then came the speeches, the awards, the Hall of Fame inductions and yes, some tears.

Three members were inducted into the IWGS Hall of Fame. Deb Spencer, co-owner of Water's Edge in Lawrence, Kansas, was honored for her contributions to trade and technology, including the creation of pump performance charts and decades of practical knowledge-sharing with contractors and the public.

Susan Davis, a former IWGS president, was inducted for her contributions to the society and to the trade, and for her particular gift of helping customers find their own vision of water in the garden. She and Spencer co-owned Water's Edge together from 1989 to 2020.

The third induction was posthumous. Kit Knotts, who died in 2023, was honored for her contributions to horticulture and knowledge. Her Victoria hybridizing research and the websites she created, Victoria-Adventure.org and WaterGardenersInternational.org, became what Rich Sacher called "a worldwide treasury of aquatic plant information."

In his tribute to Kit, Sacher also offered perhaps the best reminder of what this community is and does, and why we were gathered in the first place.

"This IWGS to which we belong is really a giant catalytic converter. We bring people together from all over the world, we cross-pollinate each other with our enthusiasm, ideas and plants and we produce some wonderful hybrids — and the very best ones are the lifelong friendships which we create."

To Be Continued ...

The evening ended outside, around the ponds again. The day bloomers had closed. The night bloomers were open.

And I have a feeling a few water gardeners were already thinking about the 2027 symposium, when the community will gather again in the Netherlands and Belgium.

For more information about the IWGS and future symposiums, visit iwgs.org.

About the Author



Julie Rechtien is the Marketing Manager at Chalily, the full-service garden center and online pond plant retailer in Wildwood, Missouri that organized the 2026 IWGS Symposium in St. Louis.







BUILT ON A GRAND SCALE

Inside a 100-Foot Recreation Pond

by Joe Zawistowski,
Black Koi Water Features

Fletcher, North Carolina, is home to what may be one of the largest recreation ponds on the East Coast. It checks nearly every box a water feature can check: an intake bay skimming system, an Aquascape upflow bog filtration system, a dock, dedicated fishing pools stocked with bass, a beach entry, aeration, massive stone patio slabs for sunbathing, stairs, benches, statuary, dense plantings of aquatic plants and full night lighting. At roughly 100 feet long and 60 to 80 feet wide, it sits in its own category.



For Joe Zawistowski, founder of Black Koi Water Features, the project's scale sets a new precedent for both water feature size and design. It isn't quite a traditional recreation pond, ecosystem pond or natural pond. Instead, it falls somewhere in between, combining the scale of a larger natural body of water with the careful design, craftsmanship and attention to detail of a custom-built water feature.

A Challenging Foundation

The project began as a low, unfinished indentation in the property. Building in a low-lying area presents drainage and groundwater challenges that contractors typically try to avoid, and this site delivered nearly all of them.

During excavation, the crew encountered three separate underground springs, with water bubbling directly out of the ground. Managing that groundwater required an extensive underdrain system designed to channel water from beneath the pond, under the road and to daylight on the opposite side of the property.

The challenges extended beyond groundwater management. Moving boulders large enough to complement the pond's massive footprint required renting a specialized excavator capable of lifting stone far beyond the capacity of equipment typically used on residential water features.

Construction took place during June and July, among the hottest and often wettest months in western North Carolina. For several consecutive weeks, afternoon rainstorms complicated progress, particularly before the liner installation and rock placement could begin.

Between the unpredictable weather, underground springs and enormous stonework, the project became one of the most physically demanding builds the Black Koi crew had undertaken.

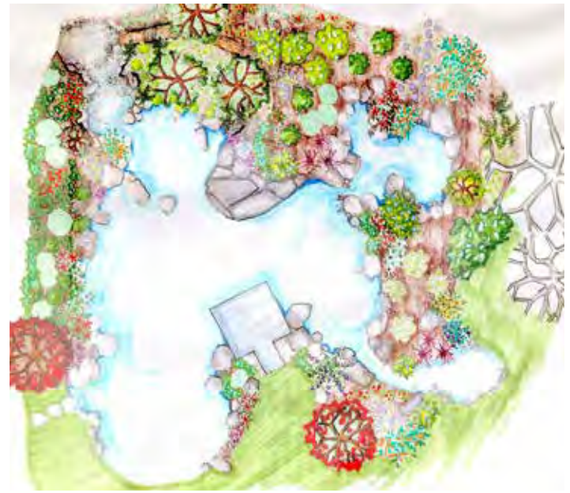
Features Designed to Be Explored, Not Just Viewed

A handful of details set this build apart from a standard recreation pond.

While clearing the site, the crew came across a large, decaying oak log in the surrounding woods, from a tree an estimated 24 to 30 inches in diameter. Rather than leave it behind, they worked it directly into the feature. Partially submerged, it adds biodiversity value and a strong visual anchor, functioning as much for its "wow factor" as for the ecosystem benefit.

Toward one end of the pond is what the crew calls the remediation zone, a shallow sanctuary area that stays out of reach of the pond's larger fish and predators. It's where tadpoles, small fish, aquatic plants and microbes can establish with less competition, and it doubles as a nutrient sink that helps support the system's ecological balance.

The sunbathing slabs are their own destination. Cut to roughly 10 feet across and set right at the edge of the pond's deep water, they allow swimmers to enter the water directly and climb back onto stone warmed by the sun.



What makes the design particularly interesting is how these elements work together. Rather than creating a single focal point, the pond offers multiple destinations, each encouraging a different interaction with the water. Visitors can move from the beach entry to the stone terraces, explore the shoreline or spend time fishing from the dock. The result is a water feature that functions as an extension of the property's outdoor living space.

The waterfall is the feature's centerpiece, and Zawistowski intentionally designed it to look different from waterfalls Black Koi has created on other projects. It narrows at the top and progressively widens toward the base, mimicking the way waterfalls naturally form.

As part of that approach, Zawistowski typically reserves some of a project's largest boulders for the waterfall, where













their scale can have the greatest visual impact.

That strategy is especially evident here. The largest boulder, framing the second drop, stands roughly 5 feet tall and is estimated at 8,000 to 10,000 pounds. Several others in the structure weigh closer to 6,000 pounds each.

Filtration Built to Match the Scale

A pond of this magnitude requires a filtration system capable of supporting its substantial water volume while maintaining the natural appearance of the surrounding landscape.

The system incorporates two primary components: an intake bay skimming system and an Aquascape upflow bog filtration system.

The intake bay functions much like a swimming pool skimmer, but on a considerably larger scale. Positioned slightly lower than the surrounding water, it directs surface flow into a designated collection area, where leaves and other floating debris can be removed with a net.

Even the drainage and overflow components were incorporated into the landscape design. A small bridge and river rock conceal functional elements, allowing water to move through the system without compromising the pond's natural appearance.

Water is also circulated through an upflow bog filtration chamber approximately 6 feet deep, containing thousands of pounds of layered rock. As water moves upward through the stone, suspended particles are captured, while beneficial microorganisms colonizing the rock surfaces help process nutrients and organic material.

The result is a filtration approach inspired by natural aquatic ecosystems but engineered to accommodate the extraordinary scale of the project.

At this scale, the challenge extends beyond simply moving and filtering water. Each component must function efficiently while remaining visually integrated into the landscape. The combination of naturalistic stonework, concealed infrastructure and biological filtration allows the pond to maintain the appearance of a natural body of water without sacrificing the engineered systems supporting it.

Creating a Living Ecosystem

Beyond its recreational features, the pond was designed to support a diverse aquatic environment.

An avid bass fisherman and friend of the homeowner introduced several rounds of bass to establish a fishing population. The initial stocking was unsuccessful, potentially because the developing ecosystem had not yet established a sufficient food supply, with winter losses presenting an additional challenge.

Subsequent stocking efforts have been more successful, and the pond now supports an active fishing area.

The shallow remediation zone, submerged wood and extensive aquatic plantings provide additional habitat opportunities for smaller fish, amphibians and beneficial microorganisms, creating an ecosystem that will continue developing as the pond matures.

A Pond that's Still Growing Up

At under a year old, the ecosystem is still establishing itself. The pond has experienced a mild algae bloom, something that can occur as a new aquatic system develops and its biological processes begin to stabilize.

As the aquatic plants mature, lily pads and other surface coverage will expand, reducing the amount of direct sunlight reaching the water and helping manage algae growth over time.

The surrounding landscaping, including Japanese maples, is expected to follow a similar progression. The first year focuses largely on establishment, followed by root development and increasingly visible growth in subsequent seasons.

Five years from now, the landscape surrounding the pond is expected to look substantially different as the plantings mature and the entire feature becomes more integrated into its environment.

Despite its already impressive footprint, there is even talk of expanding the pond further. As Zawistowski jokes, "It's just not big enough."

Built to Last and Built with Pride

Every job leaves a mark on the crew that builds it, and this one is no exception. Water feature construction at this scale is physically demanding work, and getting it right takes persistence through rain, springs and equipment challenges most residential builds never encounter.

For Zawistowski and his crew, that physical investment is part of creating something at this level. It's an approach they describe as "bleeding for beauty" — an acknowledgment that creating a water feature of this scale requires an unusual amount of effort, persistence and passion.

That commitment shows in the level of detail carried through every part of the design, from the engineered filtration system and massive stonework to the reclaimed oak log incorporated into the finished pond.

What began as a challenging low spot on the property has become a destination for swimming, fishing, relaxation and wildlife — a living landscape that will continue evolving long after construction is complete.

Contractor's Corner WINNER

This project was selected as POND Trade's Contractor's Corner winner for this past quarter!

Sponsored by Pondliner, Contractor's Corner gives pond and water-feature professionals the opportunity to showcase their best work in the pages of POND Trade Magazine. From standout pond builds and dramatic transformations to innovative water features and unique project challenges, we want to see what you've been working on.

Think your project has what it takes?

Scan the QR code to submit your project for a chance to be our next Contractor's Corner winner and be featured in POND Trade Magazine!

About the Author

Joe Zawistowski is the owner of Black Koi Water Features, a pond construction and maintenance company based in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Black Koi Water Features serves Western North Carolina and Upstate South Carolina, specializing in naturalistic ponds, recreation ponds and custom water features.



Contractor's Corner Announces New Prize: Win an OASE PondoVac 5!

POND Trade Magazine and Contractor's Corner sponsor Pondliner are giving pond professionals another reason to share their best work!

NEW for Contractor's Corner: Each quarterly winner will now receive an OASE PondoVac 5, courtesy of Pondliner, replacing the previously offered product gift certificate.

Professional pond installers are invited to submit a 1,000–1,200 word article highlighting a recent pond installation, renovation or technology application, along with project photos. Pondliner will review the quarterly submissions and select a winning case study to be featured in the Contractor's Corner spotlight on PONDtrademag.com and its homepage.

In addition to industry recognition and the opportunity to showcase your company and work to POND Trade's professional audience, the winning contractor will have an OASE PondoVac 5 shipped directly to them.

Submissions should include at least three high-resolution photos, the contractor's company name and a 100–200 word author bio. Entrants must be professional pond installers.

Have a project worth talking about? Scan the QR Code and tell us your story for your chance to be featured—and take home a brand-new OASE PondoVac 5!
https://www.pondtrademag.com/tell-us-your-story/

Pond Magic Announces New Products for 2027

Pond Magic is expanding its product lineup for 2027 with the introduction of Color & Growth Koi Food and several new pond care and maintenance products designed for pond owners and professionals.

Leading the new product offerings is Pond Magic Color & Growth Koi Food, developed to support koi growth and enhance coloration. The company is also introducing 25-liter and 50-liter aeration kits, sinking aeration rings, water testing kits and skimming nets, expanding its selection of products for pond aeration, water quality monitoring and routine maintenance.



The expanded lineup reflects Pond Magic's continued focus on providing practical solutions for koi care and pond management.

Retailers interested in stocking the new products for the 2027 season are encouraged to take advantage of Pond Magic's early buy ordering opportunity. The deadline to submit early buy orders is Dec. 18, 2026.

For product information, pricing or early buy order inquiries, contact Pond Magic at sales@pond-magic.com.



EasyPro Pond Products Connects With Industry Professionals at PPA Retreat

EasyPro Pond Products participated in the Pond Professionals Alliance (PPA) annual retreat in Newaygo, Michigan, in September, connecting with fellow industry professionals to exchange ideas and discuss opportunities within the pond and water feature industry.

The event provided an opportunity for the EasyPro team to engage with PPA members, learn about challenges facing pond businesses and gather feedback to help guide product development and support for contractors.

"The PPA is building something special. The openness and energy in the room reminded us why we love this industry, and we left with new ideas and new friends," said Jake Bradley of EasyPro's sales team.

EasyPro expressed its appreciation to PPA leadership, organizers and members for fostering a collaborative environment that encourages networking, knowledge sharing and continued industry growth.

For more information about EasyPro Pond Products, visit www.easypro.com.

Franklin Electric Shares Global Water Perspectives Through Photography Exhibit

Franklin Electric Co., Inc. shared its corporate collection of environmental photographs by internationally recognized photographer Edward Burtynsky through a special exhibition titled "Water" at the University of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

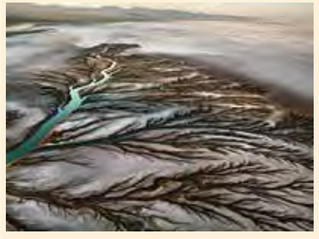
Held Aug. 24 through Sept. 17 at the university's Rolland Center Weatherhead Gallery, the exhibition featured photographs highlighting the relationship between water, industry and the environment. The collection includes images of major water infrastructure, hydroelectric projects, aquaculture operations and agricultural irrigation systems.

The photographs, normally displayed at Franklin Electric's Fort Wayne headquarters, reflect the company's connection to water resources worldwide. Burtynsky is known for his large-scale environmental photography, with work featured in prominent institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and Tate Modern in London.

"As part of our corporate space, these photographs have served as a reminder of how the Franklin Electric team makes water possible around the world," said Joe Ruzynski, CEO of Franklin Electric. "Now, we're excited to share them with the Fort Wayne community. We hope they serve as a catalyst for meaningful conversations about stewardship, sustainability and responsible water use."

Sponsored by Franklin Electric, the exhibition and related public events were free and open to the community. The initiative reflects the company's ongoing commitment to supporting arts and education through community partnerships and its charitable foundation, which provides scholarships and contributes to nonprofit organizations.

For more information about Franklin Electric, visit www.franklin-electric.com.





Left: Edward Burtynsky, Colorado River Dlta #3 (Near San Felipe, Baja, Mexico), 2011.
Right: Edward Burtynsky, Pivot Irrigation #10 (High Plains, Texas Panhandle, USA), 2011.

Atlantic-Oase Announces 2026-27 Winter Water Feature Training Schedule



Atlantic-Oase has announced its 2026-27 winter water feature training program, offering professional contractors hands-on educational opportunities at the company's headquarters in Aurora, Ohio.

The program features four training sessions and a new boot camp, with eight training dates available throughout the season. Designed for contractors of varying experience levels, the courses cover water feature products, installation best practices and strategies for improving profitability.

The four sessions focus on specific aspects of water feature construction and maintenance:

Session 1: Fountains, Formal Spillways and Pond-Free Systems

Session 2: Water Garden Systems, Pumps and Maintenance

Session 3: Advanced Systems and Filtration

Session 4: Hardscape and Formal Spillway Systems

New this year, Atlantic-Oase is introducing a boot camp that combines Sessions 1 and 2 into one week of intensive training. Participants will receive instruction in fountains, formal spillways, pond-free waterfalls, ponds and pumps.

In addition to hands-on instruction, the program provides opportunities for contractors to connect with industry professionals, exchange ideas and expand their knowledge of water feature design and installation.

Registration is now open, with limited availability for each session. Training takes place at Atlantic-Oase headquarters, 125 Lena Drive, Aurora, Ohio.

For additional information or to register, visit www.oase.com/en-US/pond-and-water-garden/contractor or contact Atlantic-Oase at 330-274-8317.

Trade News

Fountain Equipment Group Introduces ZP2 Heat Digital Water Heaters





Fountain Equipment Group offers its ZP2 Heat line of digital, energy-efficient water heaters designed for pond, pool, spa and fountain applications.

Available in five models — 1.5 kW (120V), 5.5 kW (240V), 6 kW (240V), 11 kW (240V) and 18 kW (240V) — the heaters provide a range of options to accommodate different water heating needs. Each unit features an easy-to-read digital display and push-button temperature controls for convenient operation and precise temperature adjustments.

Designed for installation on filtered water return lines, ZP2 Heat systems must be installed by a licensed electrical contractor. All models are backed by a three-year warranty, with prepaid freight included.

For additional product information, contact Fountain Equipment Group at mcwseg@gmail.com or visit www.fountainequipmentgroup.com.

Fountain Equipment Group Introduces ZP2 UVC Pro Systems for Cleaner, Healthier Water

Fountain Equipment Group offers its ZP2 UVC Pro and Premium UV systems, designed to improve water clarity and support healthier aquatic environments in ponds, fountains and pools.

With eight UVC system options available, the product lines provide solutions for a variety of applications and flow rate requirements. Each system features a stainless steel tube and powder-coated control head, combining durable construction with dependable performance.



The systems incorporate high-intensity UV lamps and are backed by a five-year warranty. Engineered for efficiency and longevity, Fountain Equipment Group's ZP2 UVC systems provide water treatment solutions for both residential and commercial applications.

For shop drawings, pricing or a complete product catalog, contact Fountain Equipment Group or visit www.fountainequipmentgroup.com.

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EasyPro Pond Products 36, 37
EasyPro Pond Products 43
Evolution Aqua USA, Inc. 67
Fielding Pump Company 38
Fitz's Fish Ponds, LLC 67
Fountain Equipment Group 40
GC Tek 55
Kloubec Koi Farm 18, 65
Koi & More Pond Shop 65
Lindley Stone 51
Netherland Bulb 3
PerformancePro Pumps 57
Pondliner 24
Pond Magic 44
POND Trade Magazine 20, 64
Pond Professionals Alliance 33, 64
PondPros.com 51
Reflections Water Gardens 2
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The Deep End 27
Water Becomes a Garden 27, 64
Zeigler 11

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