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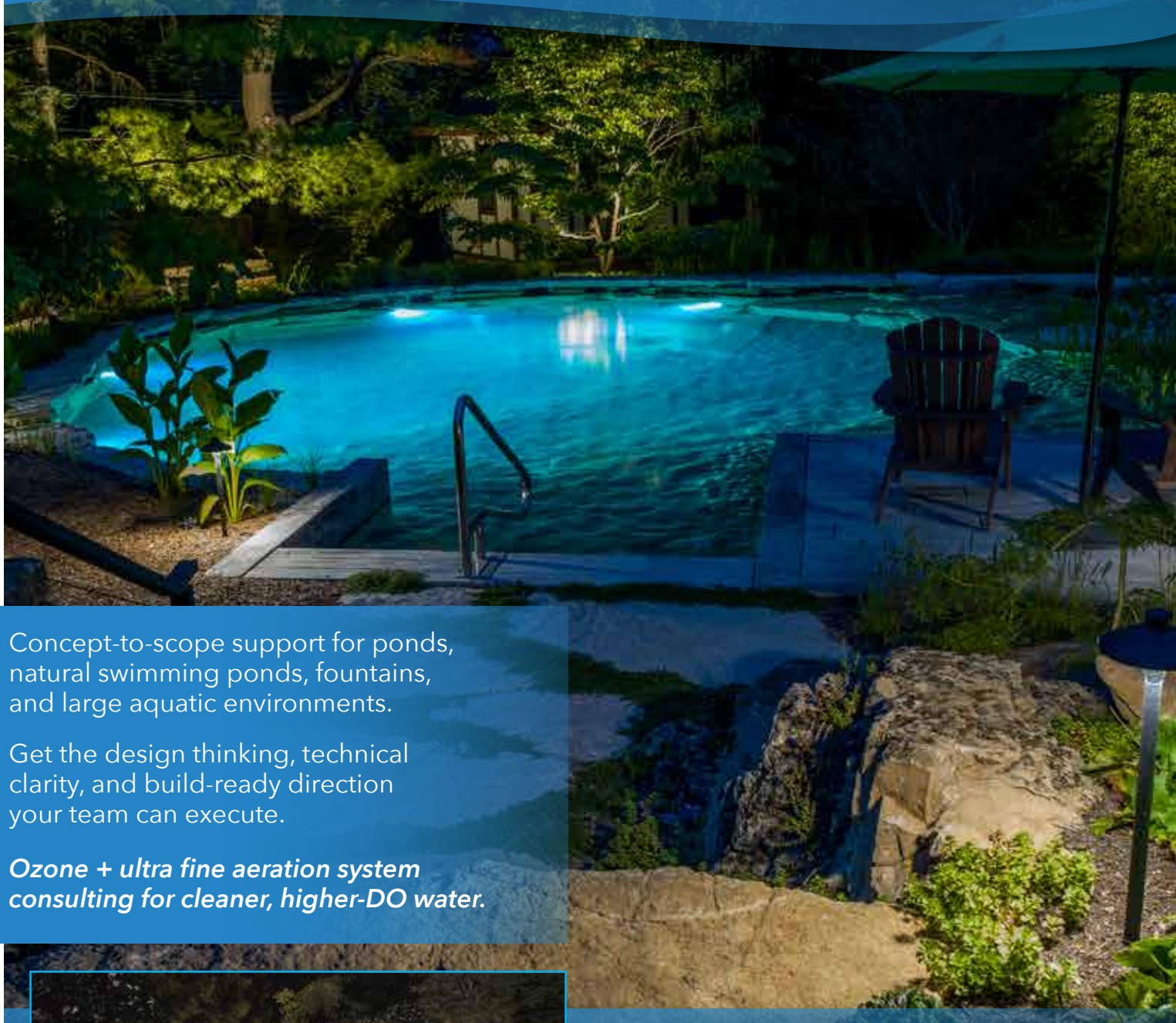
*Water
Artisans
of the Year*

Celebrating a decade of excellence
in aquatic artistry p.9

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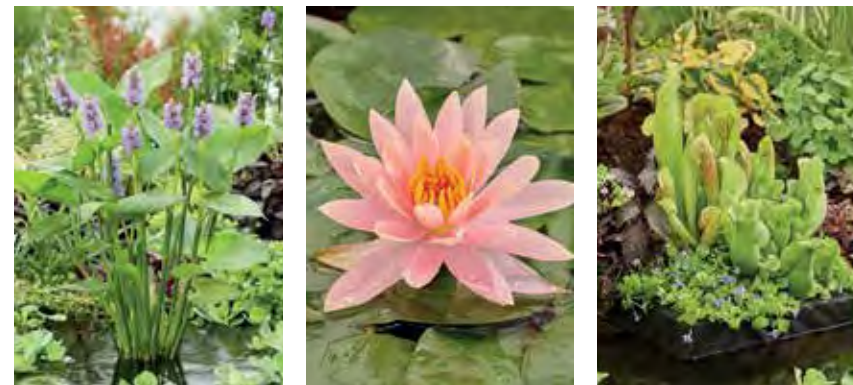
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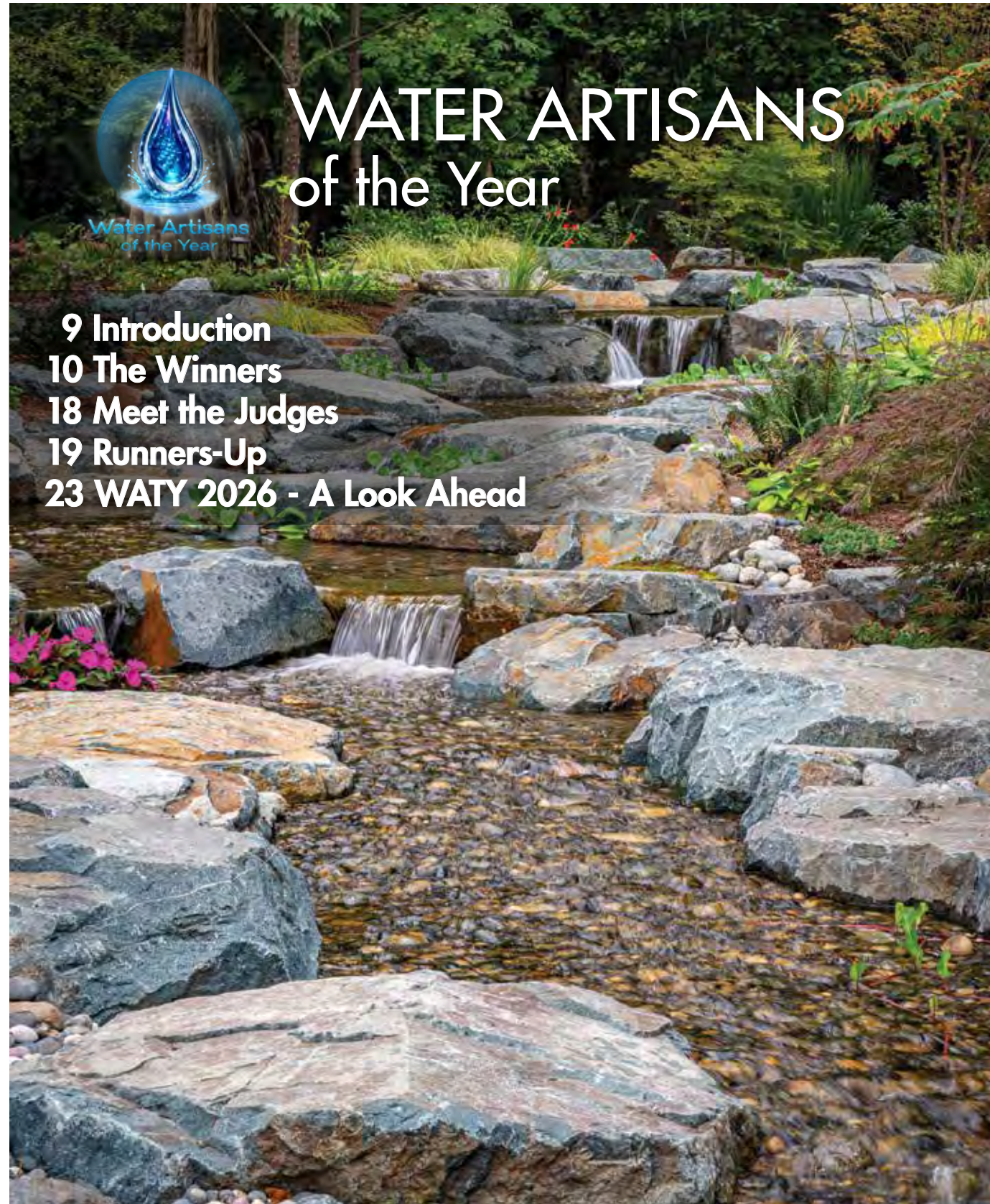
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First impressions happen in seconds, and powerful visuals can make or break a client's decision to learn more about your work. **Chris Major** reveals how compelling photography can turn pond projects into must-have experiences.

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In this leadership-focused piece, **Larry Carnes** explains why hiring for character, defining core values and investing in people is the true foundation of a resilient pond business.

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Awards do more than recognize great projects. **Zara Graham** explores how they shape industry standards and strengthen long-term visibility for pond builders.

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In this design-focused feature, **James Hiestand** explains how thoughtful planting is more than decoration — it shapes the function, ecology and emotional impact of every water feature.

55 Butterfly Koi LANGUAGE OF KOI

With their flowing fins and striking movement, Butterfly koi bring elegance and visual drama to any pond. In this feature, **Ellen Kloubec** examines their development, durability and growing importance as both a design element and a reliable choice for pond professionals.

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Upcoming Events

2026

March 11 - 13

Water Garden Expo
Grand Casino Hotel & Resort
Shawnee, OK
www.wgexpo.com

March 23 - 26

The Deep End: Dedicated Koi Pond Build
Las Vegas, NV
https://allamericankoishow.com/aaks-2026-master-class-registration-2/

March 27 - 29

All American Koi Show
Las Vegas, NV
www.allamericankoishow.com

April 10 - 12

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

April 23 - 26

Aquatic Gardeners Association
The Wyndham Sacramento
Sacramento, CA
https://www.aga2026.org

April 24 - 25

ZNA Carolina Koi Show
Raleigh, NC
www.znacarolina.com/koi-show

May 2 - 3

Plant Fest 2026
Fitz's Fish Ponds: Saddle River
Saddle River, NJ
www.fitzfishponds.com/events

July 25 - August 15

Red, White & Bloom Water Garden Tour
KC Water Garden Society
www.kcwatergardens.com

August 15 - 18

Pondemonium
Aqualand
St. Charles, IL
www.aquascapeinc.com/professionals/pondemonium

August 21 - 22

Koi Fest 2026
Fitz's Fish Ponds Farm
Milford, NJ
www.fitzfishponds.com/events

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Publisher's Perspective

Celebrating the 10th Annual Water Artisans of the Year Awards



There is something energizing about the March/April issue each year. It signals the shift from planning to building, from winter reflection to a season of action, creativity and momentum. As our industry gears up for the busy months ahead, this issue is about putting your best foot forward, honoring your progress and allowing

inspiration to guide the work you create this year.

I am especially honored to host the 10th Annual Water Artisan of the Year (WATY) Awards in this milestone issue. Reaching a decade of celebrating excellence is no small achievement, and it reflects the growth, artistry and innovation that define the pond and water feature industry today. What began as a celebration of craftsmanship has evolved into a respected platform that showcases the depth of talent within our community.

In honor of this milestone, we are also unveiling a refreshed WATY logo — a modern evolution that reflects the prestige and maturity the awards have earned over the past decade. The updated mark maintains the integrity and symbolism of the original while introducing a more refined presence that mirrors the elevated standard of work being submitted each year. It is a visual representation of growth, honoring where we started while confidently stepping into the future of the program and the industry it celebrates.

This year's awards were particularly meaningful, with more than 70 entries submitted and over \$2,000 raised for St. Jude — a testament to both the skill and the generosity of this industry. As we celebrate the 10-year anniversary, we are also introducing new initiatives to further elevate the program and better reflect the voice of the professionals it represents. Opening the door for an awards committee and greater community participation is an exciting step forward, giving the industry a direct role in shaping categories, criteria and the future direction of the awards. My hope is that everyone participates as we continue to raise the bar together.

On a personal note, this issue, alongside the Water Garden Expo, also marks my one-year anniversary as the owner and publisher of POND Trade Magazine. I am filled

with immense pride and honor to carry the torch of this publication and steward a platform that represents such a passionate, knowledgeable and creative industry. Over the past year, it has been truly wonderful getting to know so many individuals across the field and having a front-row seat to the craftsmanship, innovation and shared knowledge that make this industry so unique. The willingness of professionals to support one another, share insights and elevate the trade is something that continues to inspire me every day.

This issue features a special WATY anniversary section, including the introduction, winners, runner-ups and a closer look at our judges, whose expertise and dedication help ensure the awards remain credible, inspiring and aligned with the evolving standards of our industry.

Beyond the awards, this issue is designed to fuel both your mindset and your craft as the season begins. We explore the power of visual storytelling and first impressions ("First Impressions," pg. 24), the importance of strong team culture as a business foundation ("The Bedrock of the Build," pg. 33), and the broader impact of recognition in "From Jobsite to Spotlight: Why Industry Awards Matter" (pg. 40). From there, we examine the transformative role of planting in living water features ("The Living Palette," pg. 46), the elegance and reliability of Butterfly koi as dynamic design elements ("Butterfly Koi," pg. 54), the global innovation of the 2025 IWGS New Waterlily Competition (pg. 60), and the biological strength of well-designed bog systems ("Bogs," pg. 64).

Collectively, these features reflect a simple but powerful message: our industry is evolving, maturing and gaining recognition as both a technical discipline and an art form.

As you move into the season ahead, I encourage you to let this issue — and the awards — inspire your work. Be proud of where you have been, the projects you have completed and the knowledge you have gained. But equally, be proud of where you are going. Document your progress, refine your craft and continue pushing your standards higher.

Here's to a strong season, inspired craftsmanship and a community that continues to raise the bar together.

Until the next splash,

Lauren Nolan

Publisher, POND Trade Magazine

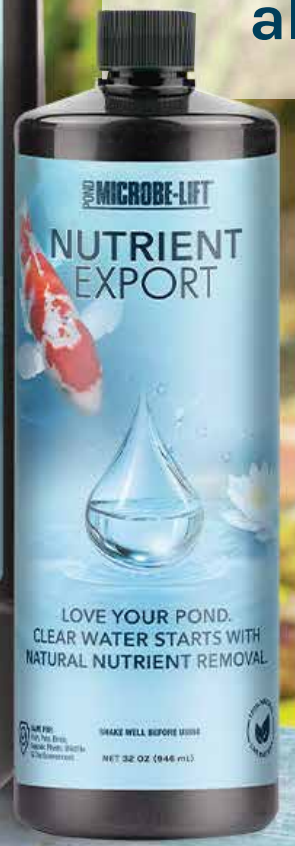
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Water Artisans

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WATER ARTISANS OF THE YEAR WINNERS!

Showcasing the 2025 season's finest waterscapes

by **Lauren Nolan**,
Publisher of POND Trade Magazine

This year marks an important milestone for the Water Artisans of the Year Awards. While this is the 10th year the awards have been presented by POND Trade magazine, it is my first year stewarding the program as editor and publisher.

With that responsibility comes intention. The Water Artisans of the Year Awards have always stood for something more than recognition. They represent trust—trust that every project is evaluated fairly, that craftsmanship outweighs branding, and that excellence is recognized without influence. That standard is not something to be reinvented, but something to be protected and elevated.

All projects submitted this year were judged anonymously. Contractor names, company affiliations and

brand identifiers were removed before review, ensuring that each entry was evaluated solely on design, execution and artistry. There is no corporate sponsorship attached to these awards and no outside influence on the judging process. Each winning project earns its place on merit alone.

This year's honorees reflect that commitment. **Diego Asturias** and **Bradley Blocksom** each earn their second Water Artisan of the Year distinction, reinforcing the consistency and caliber of their work. **Thomas VanAmerongen** and **Erick Santana** also join the multiple-time winners circle with their second WATY awards. Together, this group represents sustained excellence and leadership within the water-feature industry.

Submissions were reviewed by an independent panel of judges, each bringing decades of hands-on experience and industry knowledge to the process. Entries were solicited across four categories: Best Pondless, Most

Naturalistic, Fountains & Formal Features, and Recreational Ponds—a cross-section that reflects both the artistry and technical range of today's water-feature professionals. This year, more than 70 projects were submitted for consideration. A \$25 submission fee accompanied each entry, resulting in approximately \$2,000 donated to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

As this awards program moves forward into its next decade, feedback will play an important role. Listening to our contributors, judges and readers is essential as we continue to raise the bar, grow the number of submissions, and expand international participation—while preserving the integrity and credibility that have defined the Water Artisans of the Year Awards from the beginning.

Please enjoy these standout projects from the 2025 pond season—and join us in celebrating the artisans who continue to define the very best of our industry.



FIRST PLACE
WINNER

PONDLESS



Bradley Blocksom

Pondscapes of Charlotte
Charlotte, NC - USA

Brad Blocksom, a now two-time Water Artisan of the Year winner, is the CEO of Pondscapes of Charlotte and brings more than two decades of experience in creating custom natural water features. Growing up working alongside his father, Dave Blocksom, in the family business, Blocksom developed a deep appreciation for blending artistry with nature—an approach that continues to define his work today.

One of the most compelling qualities of a skilled water artisan is the ability to turn an everyday space into an experience—one that invites people to gather, linger and return again and again. This pondless water feature was designed and built by Bradley Blocksom of Pondscapes of Charlotte for a homeowner seeking a backyard that could serve equally as a place for celebration and quiet retreat.

The client envisioned a setting that would impress guests while still offering a sense of calm for daily use. The solution was an island patio, accessible only by a series of natural stepping stones, creating a subtle sense of arrival. Surrounded entirely by water, the space is encircled by waterfalls flowing from every direction.

From any seat on the island, water moves and speaks. Multiple cascades create a fully immersive, 360-degree

experience, with sound and motion carefully balanced to feel enveloping rather than overwhelming. Stone and boulder placement guide the eye and the ear, allowing the feature to feel both intentional and effortless.

At the center of the flagstone patio sits a FireBoulder, introducing warmth and contrast to the surrounding water. The fire element is controlled discreetly from within the stone itself, preserving the natural aesthetic while allowing the space to shift seamlessly from day to night.

Today, the client and his wife use the space as it was intended—hosting friends around the fire in the evening and starting their mornings with coffee, surrounded by the steady, calming presence of moving water. A destination for guests, and a refuge for everyday life.





FIRST PLACE
WINNER

FOUNTAINS & FORMAL FEATURES



Erick Santana

Bella's Aquatic Gardens
Miami, FL - USA

Erick Santana is the owner of Bella's Aquatic Gardens in Miami, Florida, where he has spent the past two decades building ponds and creating backyard environments rooted in nature and craftsmanship. While Bella's Aquatic Gardens began operating professionally in 2005, Santana's connection to water and fish-keeping dates back to the 1980's, shaping a lifelong understanding of aquatic systems.

Raised in a construction family, Santana has worked in the building trades for most of his life, developing a strong foundation in structure, materials and execution. That technical background is complemented by formal art studies and a deep passion for outdoor life—an intersection that continues to influence his approach to water-feature design. His commitment to blending artistic vision with functional, enduring construction has earned Santana two Water Artisan of the Year honors, recognizing work that balances creativity, experience and respect for the natural environment.

One of the most compelling qualities of Formal koi ponds is that they demand an uncommon level of discipline—where architectural precision, structural integrity and aquatic life support must function as one. This custom concrete koi pond, built by Erick Santana of Bella's Aquatic Gardens, anchors the center of an exclusive country club in South Florida, serving as both a visual focal point and a long-term living system.

Designed by the project's landscape architect and executed entirely in reinforced concrete, the pond was engineered for permanence. A double cage of No. 4 rebar forms the structural core, with integrated benches reinforced using No. 5 rebar. The pond floor exceeds 18 inches in thickness, while the benches approach 2½ feet of solid concrete, resulting in approximately 50 cubic yards of concrete within the 25-by-24-foot structure.

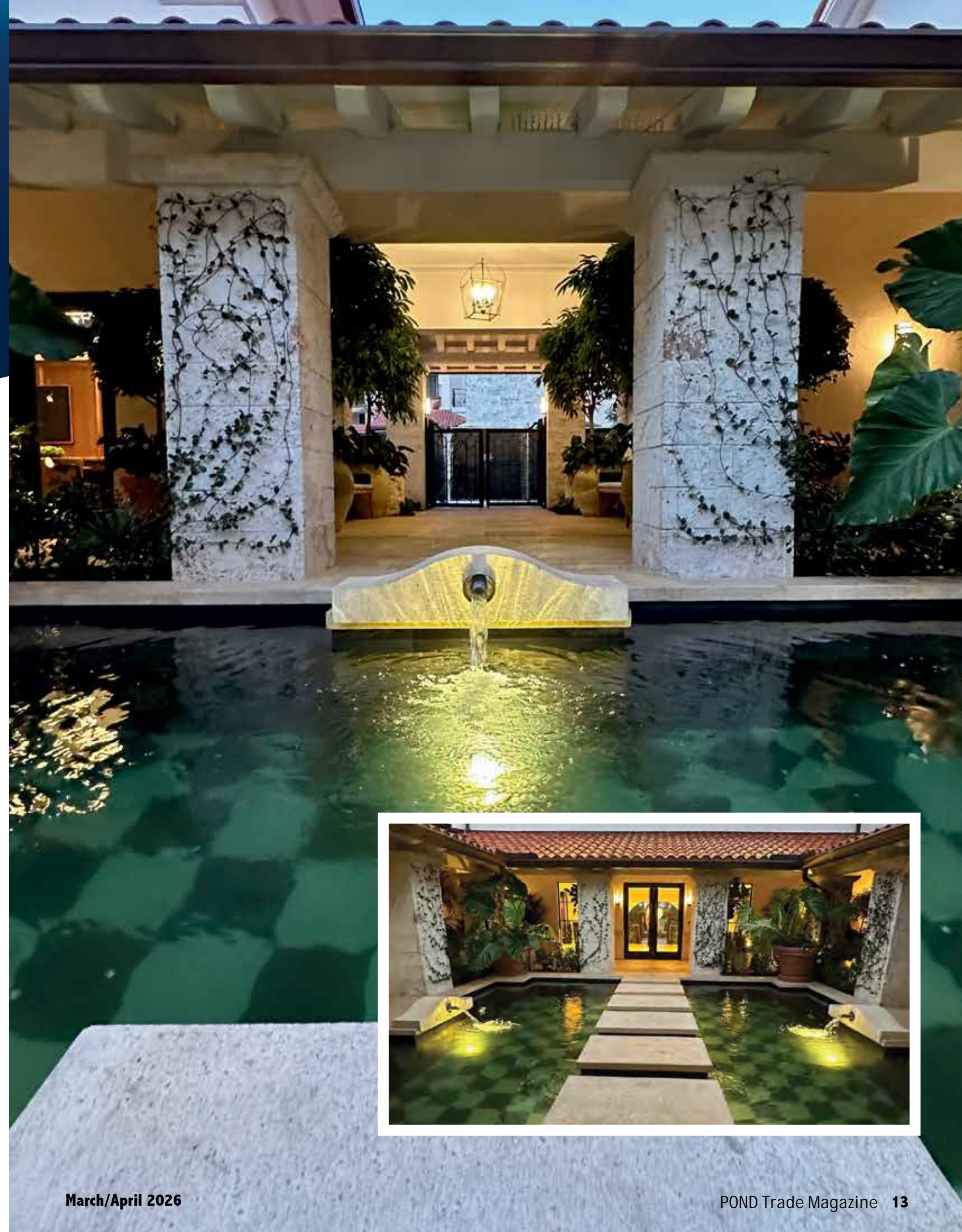
The formal aesthetic is reinforced through material choice and craftsmanship. Imported Italian porcelain tile lines the interior, installed using advanced setting

materials suitable for fully submerged environments. Coping, stepping stones and waterfall elements were custom cast in concrete, allowing every surface to align with the pond's architectural geometry.

Below the waterline, the system was designed with redundancy in mind. Two independent life-support systems provide circulation, filtration, ultraviolet and ozone treatment, along with heating and cooling capacity to maintain stable water temperatures year-round in South Florida's demanding climate.

Constructed under a rigorous schedule and in coordination with multiple trades, the pond required precise sequencing and execution at every stage. Located at the heart of the country club, all systems were installed and tested to exacting standards before surrounding construction could proceed.

The result is a formal koi pond defined by structure, restraint and longevity—an architectural water feature built to perform, endure and quietly elevate its surroundings.





FIRST PLACE
WINNER

MOST NATURALISTIC



Diego Asturias & Dan Peterson

Fontana Ponds & Water Features
Mission, BC - CANADA

Diego Asturias and Dan Peterson own Fontana Ponds & Water Features in British Columbia, Canada, which expanded from a landscape construction and maintenance company to a full-time water feature builder in 2019. They have a passion for water and a hunger for continuously learning new techniques and developing their artistry.

Some projects begin with a sketch. Others begin with patience. For this homeowner, the vision of a stream winding through his backyard lived in his imagination for nearly 20 years. When the time finally came to bring it to life, Diego Asturias and Dan Peterson of Fontana Ponds and Water Features were entrusted with translating that long-held dream into reality.

Set against a forested backdrop, the naturalistic stream was designed to feel as though it had always belonged to the landscape. Its path twists and turns organically, following the contours of the site rather than imposing upon it. Stretching approximately 100 feet in length with four feet of elevation change, the stream creates constant movement and visual interest as water flows steadily toward the home.

To achieve a sense of scale and authenticity, a 20-foot-wide liner was used, allowing room for large boulders and dynamic water flow. The generous width supports depth, sound and motion, giving the stream presence without overwhelming its surroundings.

Beneath the surface, a 2,300-gallon reservoir and three SLD 5–9000 pumps provide the power needed to keep the stream active year-round. The flow is intentionally aimed toward the home, framing views through windows and ensuring the water remains a focal point from inside as well as out.

The result is a stream shaped by time, intention and respect for place—one that fulfills a decades-long vision while offering beauty and movement in every season.



FIRST PLACE
WINNER

RECREATIONAL PONDS



**Thomas
VanAmerongen**

Niagara Waterscapes
Beamsville, ON - CANADA

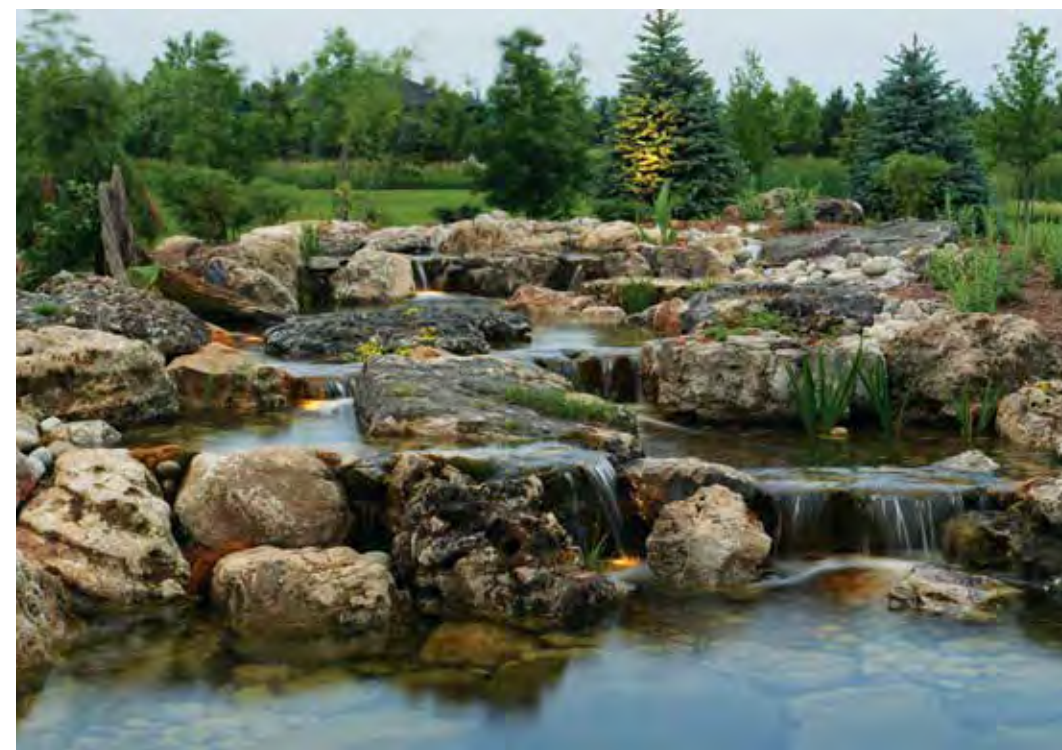
Thomas VanAmerongen is the founder of Niagara Waterscapes, a local, hands-on company creating beautiful, natural outdoor spaces across the Niagara region. Specializing in ponds, waterfalls and integrated landscapes, VanAmerongen and his team focus on building environments that bring peace and enjoyment to the backyard. That commitment to honest work, lasting quality and helping homeowners connect with nature at home has earned VanAmerongen two Water Artisan of the Year awards, recognizing a body of work grounded in craftsmanship, care and long-term enjoyment.

One of the defining challenges in recreational pond design is finding harmony between structure and nature—creating a space that feels intentional without losing its sense of calm. This ecosystem recreation pond, designed and built by Thomas VanAmerongen of Niagara Waterscapes, transforms a once-ordinary backyard into a place for both immersion and retreat.

Measuring approximately 20 by 25 feet and four feet deep, the pond is anchored by a 10-by-15-foot wetland filtration system, allowing the water to remain clear while keeping maintenance minimal. The result is a system that supports both daily use and long-term enjoyment without sacrificing performance or aesthetics.

The design blends natural elements with formal cues. Architectural walls and oversized flagstone define the space and bring a sense of order, while large natural stone steps ease the transition from land to water, inviting swimmers to step in and cool off. Five Corten steel planters introduce a contemporary contrast, adding warmth and texture to the surrounding landscape.

As daylight fades, underwater lighting animates the pond, extending its use well into the evening and revealing new layers of movement and reflection. Together, these elements create a recreational water feature that balances structured elegance with organic tranquility—a backyard ecosystem designed not just to be admired, but to be lived in.



| The Judges |



Ryan Farnol
Platinum Ponds
& Landscaping



Chris Thompson
Just Add Water



Water Artisans
of the Year



Kendahl Kreps
Atlantic-Oase



Tim Waddington
Quality Nishikigoi
Koi Trips



Stan Suh
Flow Landscape



Craig McBride
SwimPond | PPA

Meet the 2025 Supreme Stream Court

The esteemed judges of the Water Artisans of the Year Awards

by **Lauren Nolan**,
Publisher of POND Trade Magazine

As the Water Artisan of the Year Awards continue to elevate the standards of excellence within the water-feature industry, the program is guided by an esteemed panel known as the Supreme Stream Court. This distinguished body is composed of past award recipients, master craftsmen, industry leaders, and respected innovators who collectively safeguard the integrity and prestige of the competition.

Each member of the 2025 Court brings a legacy of achievement and a commitment to advancing the craft of aquatic design.

Internationally respected koi authority **Tim Waddington** of Quality Nishikigoi and Koi Trips lends decades of global experience to the panel. His expertise in world-class Nishikigoi and advanced water-quality standards ensures entries are evaluated with disciplined precision and a deep understanding of aquatic excellence.

Founder of Platinum Ponds & Landscaping, **Ryan Farnol** returns to the Awards not as a competitor, but as a former

Water Artisan of the Year recipient. With nearly two decades of design-build experience, his perspective reflects both artistic vision and technical execution — a balance critical to identifying true mastery.

Representing Atlantic-Oase, **Kendahl Kreps**, Director of Marketing, offers a strategic and aesthetic lens shaped by more than a decade in the industry. Her insight ensures projects are assessed not only for craftsmanship, but also for innovation, presentation, and broader industry impact.

Master Certified Aquascape Contractor **Stan Suh**, founder of Flow Landscape and a 2024 category winner, brings a recent competitor's perspective grounded in ecosystem design and structural integrity. His work is known for merging durability with natural beauty, qualities mirrored in his judging approach.

A longtime leader in aquatic design, **Craig McBride**, founder of SwimPond.com and Co-Founder of the Pond Professionals Alliance, represents decades of mentorship, education, and standards-driven leadership. His presence reinforces the Awards' commitment to professional growth and collaborative advancement.

Rounding out the Court is **Chris Thompson**, founder of Just Add Water and Water Artisan of the Year honoree in the Recreational Pond category. Known for projects that harmonize human experience with aquatic health, Thompson brings a refined and practical eye to the evaluation process.

Together, the 2025 Supreme Stream Court reflects the depth, diversity, and professionalism of today's water-feature industry. Their collective expertise ensures that the Water Artisan of the Year distinction remains more than an award — it remains a benchmark of excellence.

Excellence is not simply recognized. It is examined, measured, and earned. ☞

| Runners-Up |



Water Artisans
of the Year

Excellence at the Edge

Runner-up projects that defined the margins of excellence

Each year, the Water Artisans of the Year judging process reveals just how high that bar has become. Projects earning runner-up distinction are not secondary achievements; they represent work that pushed the judges into careful deliberation and stood shoulder to shoulder with this year's top honors. In several categories, the margins were narrow, underscoring both the depth of talent within the field and the evolving standards of the craft.

As with all Water Artisans of the Year entries, runner-up projects were reviewed anonymously by an independent panel of judges, with no contractor names, company affiliations or brand identifiers revealed during evaluation. The contest remains entirely unsponsored, preserving a level playing field and ensuring recognition is based solely on design, craftsmanship and execution. ☞



PONDLESS

2025 RUNNER-UP



Cody Gilstrap

River Rock Water Gardens
Bentonville, Arkansas - USA



This project transformed the unused slope below our client's pool into a functional outdoor living space designed for relaxation and connection. Utilizing the property's natural seven-foot elevation, a stepped, 30-foot pondless waterfall was created using 30 tons of mossy boulders. Decorative water bowls and sculptural elements allow the feature to be experienced from multiple levels, while a walk-down path and lower seating area offer an immersive perspective. Low-maintenance plantings and a fire pit complete the space, turning a former hillside into a peaceful retreat.



MOST NATURALISTIC

2025 RUNNER-UP



Brian Buchholtz

PondWorks
Pottstown, PA - USA



This signature project transformed a challenging site into a dynamic aquatic experience for a repeat client. Positioned between the road and residence, the waterscape flows beneath a precast concrete arched bridge finished with hand-applied fieldstone veneer. Leveraging a 10-foot elevation change, the design features a connected stream, three ponds and two waterfalls spanning nearly half an acre. Native-planted wetland zones provide natural filtration, while locally sourced stone unifies the installation, balancing bold scale with ecological integrity and lasting beauty.



FOUNTAINS & FORMAL FEATURES

2025 RUNNER-UP



Charlie Ross

Virginia Water Gardens
Fredericksburg, VA - USA



Built in the heart of Washington, D.C., this 90-foot formal pond sits atop a parking garage, demanding innovative engineering under strict structural limits. Designed and built by Virginia Water Gardens, the project replaces traditional gravel with 75,000 lightweight bioballs to achieve effective wetland filtration without exceeding load restrictions. Precision-cut flagstone substitutes for heavy boulders, reinforcing the refined aesthetic. Installed entirely by hand within a condominium courtyard, the finished pond demonstrates how thoughtful engineering can preserve elegance, performance and design integrity under extreme constraints.



RECREATIONAL PONDS

2025 RUNNER-UP



Daniel Taylor

Taylor'd Waterscapes
Queensland - AUS



This recreational pond brings a long-imagined vision to life, balancing swimming, entertaining and natural integration within a tree-lined property. Inspired by a natural waterhole, the pond features a sand beach entry, a submerged sandstone bench and a deeper area designed for jumping. A wetland filter and sculpted waterfall provide circulation, sound and habitat. Built on a challenging backfilled slope, the finished pond blends seamlessly into the landscape and now serves as a year-round extension of the home's outdoor living space.

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Water Artisans
of the Year

A Look Ahead Water Artisan of the Year 2026

Introducing the Water Artisan of the Year Awards Committee

As the water feature and pond industry continues to evolve, so must the standards that define excellence within it. In an effort to further elevate the integrity, transparency and prestige of the Water Artisan of the Year (WATY) Awards, we are proud to announce the formation of a newly implemented Awards Committee, comprised of respected leaders within our community. This exclusive opportunity is extended to past Award Winners and past Judges — individuals who have already demonstrated excellence, leadership and a commitment to advancing the industry.

Eight committee members will be selected to serve. The committee members will play a critical role in shaping the future of the Awards program and will assist with:

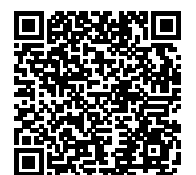
- Determining award categories
- Establishing contest criteria
- Developing the scoring rubric
- Assisting in judge selection
- Providing overall guidance to ensure fairness, relevance and industry alignment

Those selected will help ensure the Awards reflect emerging trends while maintaining the highest standards of credibility, distinction and fairness.

Join the Committee

Interested past winners and judges are invited to apply to be on the WATY Awards Committee. Members will be selected and announced by **June 1, 2026.**

Scan this QR code for the Awards Committee Submission Form



Industry-Wide Voting Opens for 2026 Award Categories

How It Works

1. Review the category list
2. Cast your vote
3. Submit a write-in suggestion (optional)
4. Submit by **June 1, 2026**

Scan this QR code to Vote on the 2026 WATY Award Categories



As our industry grows and evolves, our awards should reflect what matters most to the professionals building it.

Beginning with the 2026 Awards cycle and beyond, the industry will now have the opportunity to vote on award categories. While there will continue to be four (4) award categories, the community will help determine what those categories will be. Please complete the form to cast your vote for the categories for the 2026 Water Artisan of the Year Awards. Voting will take place from March-June 2026. Final Awards Categories will be announced in July of 2026 and award submissions will open August 2026.

The current Water Artisan of the Year categories include:

- Formal Fountains and Features
- Naturalistic Pond
- Recreational Pond
- Pondless Water Feature

Industry professionals are invited to:

- Review the list of past award categories
- Vote for the categories they would like to see represented
- Submit a write-in suggestion if they believe a new category should be added.

The Water Artisans of the Year Awards have always represented more than a competition — they symbolize craftsmanship, innovation and leadership within the water feature industry. With the introduction of a formal Awards Committee and industry-driven category voting, the program continues to raise the bar while inviting the entire community to help shape its future.



First Impressions

Why quality photography and visual storytelling matter for your pond company

by **Chris Major**,
CM Images, LLC

There is something universal about water. It draws people in, calms them, and invites them to slow down. That is why ponds, waterfalls and streams resonate so deeply. They are not just features. They are experiences, moments and places people want to be.

Yet many pond builders struggle to communicate that experience before a client ever steps onto a property. Most people encounter your work first through a screen, a brochure, a magazine or a proposal. Long before they hear the sound of the water or feel the air change

near a waterfall, they are forming opinions based on what they see.

Photography for the landscape trade is not just documentation. It is something that turns craftsmanship into clarity. It helps people understand what you do and how it could be valuable to their own lives.

This matters more than ever. In a world where attention is limited and choices are endless, your visuals often speak before you do. Before anyone asks about budgets, timelines or materials, they are answering a quieter question for themselves:

“Do I want this?”

Strong photography makes that answer easier and draws them in.



Curiosity: Attract Your Ideal Audience

Most clients meet your work long before they meet you. They see it on your website, on social media, in a magazine or through a referral text from a friend. That first interaction is almost always visual. They are not taking time to read your credentials or learn about your process. They are scanning and deciding whether you are worth pursuing any further in about three seconds.

If your images do not stop them, little else gets a chance.

This is where curiosity lives. Not in long explanation, but in emotional response. A strong image invites someone to pause. A weak one gives them permission to move on.

Pond builders understand the importance of great images but

often underestimate how much of their business depends on this brief moment of attraction. You can create extraordinary water features, but if the photos are poorly composed, cluttered or taken at the wrong time of day, much of that craftsmanship disappears. Water can look dull instead of reflective. Stonework appears flat instead of textured, and thoughtful plantings can blend into the background.

None of this reflects your actual skill. However, it does reflect how the work was captured, which can potentially harm your sales.

When people cannot clearly see beauty, they will be distracted by what you likely did not intend to be shown, and you will miss the opportunity to engage with them in an emotional way. That is the real risk of weak photography. Not only that it looks bad, but that it

fails to communicate anything at all.

At this stage, your job is not to overcomplicate the image with heavy-handed editing or nuanced composition. Rather, it is to simply invite the audience into a story. The goal is simple: Make someone stop and want to know more by showing an image that provides something the audience can aspire to. If they see themselves in the space you have created, they will want one of their own all the more.

Enlightenment: Building Trust by Showing Your Value

Once curiosity is sparked, the next step is building trust with your audience. Contractors and designers often make the mistake of trying to explain their value with industry language when what they really need is visuals to help provide context. This “proof in the pudding” lays the foundation for creating the trust a client needs to feel comfortable working with a contractor.

Your work is layered. It is not just the physical materials like stone and water; it is composition, balance and integration with the surrounding environment. These things are difficult to describe but easy to see and feel when photographed well.

Good imagery helps clients understand what they are paying for. It shows craftsmanship. It shows intention. It shows that what you build is not accidental.

This matters because price is rarely the real objection. Uncertainty is. When people do not understand the difference between one water feature and another, everything starts to look the same. Photography helps separate thoughtful design from generic installation.

Wide shots show how a feature shapes a space. Medium shots reveal movement and flow. Close-ups highlight details that might otherwise be missed. Use text callouts overlaid on images so your client knows the difference between various parts of the water feature, such as skimmers, biofiltration and bog plants.



Strong photography turns craftsmanship into clarity, helping great work be seen the way it was intended. (Drost Landscapes)

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Commitment: Customer Confidence to Move Forward

Together, these perspectives tell a fuller story. They help people see what makes your work distinct and, more importantly, that you are intentional about the materials you use because they are functional, not just fillers to make a quote bigger.

Use strong photography to help build trust with your client so you can avoid obstacles when it is time to sign a contract. Examples include presentations, case studies, before-and-after images and designs with images that highlight key features.

Let's face it, water features are emotional purchases supported by logic. People want them because they feel drawn to them, but they hesitate because of the commitment involved. Cost, time disruption, permanence and maintenance are just a few of the obstacles that can arise.

Photography plays a quiet but powerful role here.



A broader view shows how a water feature fits into its surrounding landscape and becomes part of the overall outdoor environment. (Hiner Outdoor Living)

When people can clearly see what they are getting, they feel safer moving forward. Strong imagery answers questions they may not even know how to ask. Will this feel peaceful or overwhelming? Will it fit my space? Will it look natural? Will it feel worth the investment?

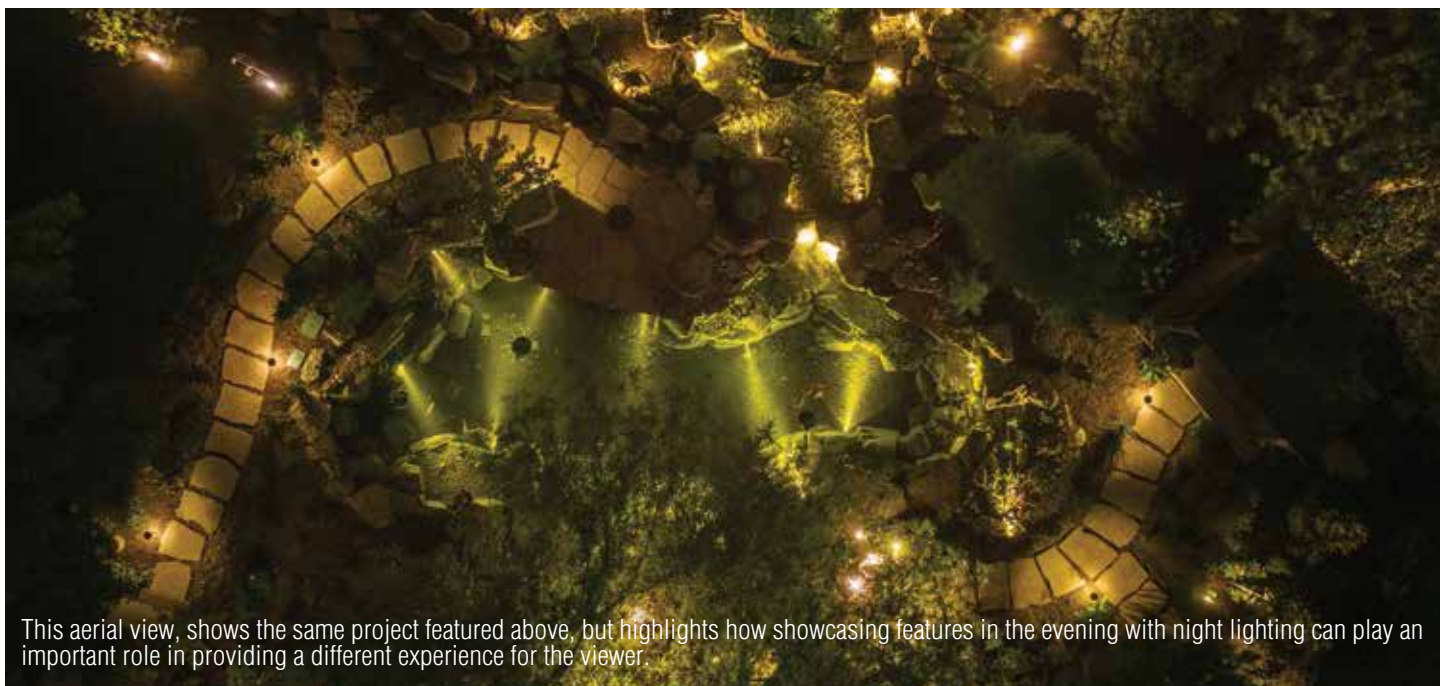
Words may struggle to resolve these doubts. Images of your work can do it instantly.

Photography becomes part of your sales process whether you intend it to or not. It appears in proposals, presentations, emails and referrals. It shapes how seriously you are taken, especially when it is time to ask for the sale.

High-quality visuals signal professionalism. They suggest that you care about how your work is presented and that this attention to detail carries over into how people assume you will handle their project. By this point, your customer should be confident that you will do what you say you will do and that moving forward feels logical.

Timing: When You Shoot Matters

Light is one of the most overlooked elements in water feature photography. It has a greater impact on the final image than most camera settings ever will.



This aerial view, shows the same project featured above, but highlights how showcasing features in the evening with night lighting can play an important role in providing a different experience for the viewer.



A slower shutter speed allows moving water to appear smooth and natural, creating an image that reflects how water is experienced in real life. (Hiner Outdoor Living)

Early morning and late evening, often referred to as golden hour, tend to produce the most flattering light. The sun sits lower in the sky, shadows become longer, and overall contrast softens. This helps reveal texture on hard surfaces like rocks and pavers, depth in water and reflections, all of which are essential to showing water features at their best.

Midday light, by comparison, is often harsh and unforgiving. It creates distracting highlights on water and forces deep shadows into areas where detail should be visible. Even beautifully designed features can look underwhelming under the wrong light.

This does not mean every project needs a perfect sunset shoot. It simply means timing matters. Take note of how light changes a scene, and you will begin to recognize opportunities. Returning to a site at a different time of day can completely transform how a project is perceived.

Every site is different. If possible, experiment with different times of day using your phone and decide what you like best. Then come back later to photograph the site when it looks the way you want to showcase it.

Capturing Motion: Making Water Look Like Water

A common mistake in water feature photography is freezing the water completely. Not physically freezing it, but making it look like time stopped. When shutter speeds are too fast, waterfalls look stiff and awkward, and streams lose their sense of flow. The result feels static rather than fluid.

Slower shutter speeds create a softer, smoother look that more closely matches how we experience water in real life. This technique gives waterfalls a silky appearance and helps streams feel dreamy and fluid rather than rigid and stuck.

To achieve this in bright conditions, photographers often use neutral density filters. These act like sunglasses for the lens, reducing the amount of light entering the camera. This allows for slower shutter speeds without overexposing the image. Neutral density filters are also available for mobile phones. Whether using a phone or a dedicated camera, mount it on a tripod to keep the image sharp.

Sometimes it makes sense to use a faster shutter speed. This is most effective in the details, where you want to

stop time and capture a single moment rather than blur it together. Reserve these moments for close-up shots of droplets or sprays of water. They give viewers the opportunity to see something their eyes might otherwise miss, which can be just as captivating.

Whether using long or short exposures, your images should reflect the emotional experience of being there so they resonate more deeply with viewers.

Showing Life: People, Pets and Presence

Many pond photos are technically beautiful but emotionally empty. The feature looks perfect, but no one seems to belong there.

This is a missed opportunity.

People are not buying pumps, liners and stone. They are buying moments: quiet mornings with coffee, conversations by the water, kids exploring or pets cooling off.

Including people or animals in your images helps viewers imagine themselves in the space. It shows scale, purpose and use.

These moments do not always need to be staged like a big-budget commercial. In fact, the most compelling images



Including people or pets in an image helps viewers imagine themselves in the space and understand how a water feature becomes part of daily life. (Drost Landscapes)

often feel candid because they are. A few props and some gentle direction are usually enough, especially if the space is well crafted. Consider what your ideal customer would want to picture for themselves and let that guide how you direct activity in the scene.

These details add warmth and relat-

ability. They remind viewers that water features are not just visual elements. They are lived-in spaces.

Composition: What You Leave Out Matters

Every image tells a story. But is it the story you want to tell? If the frame is

cluttered, the story becomes confused. That confusion can lead to uncertainty for the viewer. They may sense that something feels off without being able to articulate why. Unfortunately, that usually creates problems when the image is meant to build trust and move a prospect closer to a sale.

Good composition guides the viewer's eye. It shows them what matters. Take a moment to assess what truly matters in the frame.

Ask yourself what the photo is actually about. Is it the waterfall? The stone outcropping? The way the feature integrates with the surrounding landscape? Let the feeling of standing there guide your composition.

Change your angle. Lower your perspective. Shooting from a child's viewpoint can add intimacy and depth. For a layered look, shoot through foreground elements like plants or stone. These choices affect both composition and emotion.

Remember, it is less about what is in the frame and more about what you leave out. If you want a clean, uncluttered look, remove unnecessary items before shooting. Straighten furniture, blow off patios and skim debris from the water's surface.

Images with strong composition feel effortless and unforced, much like the trust you want to build with your customers.

Specialized Perspectives: Underwater and Aerial Views

Some of the most compelling water imagery comes from perspectives people rarely see.

Underwater shots reveal fish, textures and movement beneath the surface. Aerial images show how a feature fits into its larger environment. Both can add depth and intrigue to your portfolio.

These approaches require specialized gear, training and safety considerations. Underwater housings can be expensive. Using a drone commercially requires proper licensing and responsible operation.

These techniques are not necessary for every project, but they can elevate storytelling when used thoughtfully. If a client has special fish or underwater details you want to highlight, consider an underwater housing. If a feature has a striking layout from above, aerial photography can capture that perspective and draw attention.

For those interested in these approaches, working with a professional who understands both photography and water environments can save time, frustration and risk.

Why This All Matters

Great photography is not about showing off. It is about showing your value so you can attract customers, earn their trust and give them confidence in working with you. Your work deserves to be seen the way it feels in real life: intentional and inviting. When that feeling comes through in your images,




A finished water feature photographed in soft evening light. Strong imagery helps potential clients understand not just what was built, but how it feels to experience it. (Drost Landscapes)

Editor's Note: All images embedded within this article have been photographed by Chris Major, owner of CM Images, LLC.

people do not just notice your work, they connect with it.

Clear visuals build trust. They help clients understand what you do without long explanations. They answer questions before those questions ever need to be asked. When people can clearly see what you build and how it fits into real-life settings, they move forward with confidence and make decisions with less hesitation.

Over time, photography becomes more than a marketing tool. It becomes part of your craft. Just as you set stone, shape water and design experiences, you also guide perception. Visual storytelling determines whether your work feels like a commodity or something deeply personal and worth the investment.

You already build things that make people stop and stare. The right imagery simply makes sure they do. 



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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While you cannot force a healthy culture, you can create an environment where it is the only option.

The **Bedrock** of the **BUILD**

Why your team is the most important project you'll ever design

by **Larry Carnes**,
Reflections Water Gardens

Professional pond builders spend a lot of time talking about flow rates, liner durability and the artistry of rock placement. But the most complex ecosystem we will ever build is not made of water and stone.

It's made of people.
 Many contractors and business owners in our industry have likely felt the sting of a bad hire or the slow drain of a toxic culture. A project can be

technically perfect, but if the crew isn't clicking, the process is a nightmare.

A few years ago, I realized that growing my company required a shift in perspective, and it had to start with me. As the company's owner, I had to view my team not as a labor force but as its bedrock.

One of the biggest mistakes we can make as business owners is the "warm body" approach to hiring. We land a big contract, realize we're shorthanded and hire anyone who can swing a mattock or direct a boulder. We think we're solving a capacity problem. But, in fact, we may be creating a cultural issue that could cost us our reputation in the long run.



Team investment, which includes cross-training departments, is a mandatory budget line item at Reflections Water Gardens.

Foundation of Character

When leadership hires for skill without looking at character, they gamble with the company's reputation and the trusted brand they work hard every day to build. Skill can be taught. Integrity cannot. If a candidate has a

good work ethic and mechanical aptitude, we can teach how to fold a liner or install a filter. What we cannot teach is character — caring for a client's property, thinking five or six steps ahead on a job or supporting teammates when we're not looking.

To move from a job-to-job mindset into a team-oriented legacy company, we stopped asking, "Can this person do the job?" We started asking, "Does this person belong on the team?" And if so, "Are they in the right seat on the bus?"

During the early days of our business, everyone did everything. While that "all hands on deck" mentality may be great for startups, over time it created a ceiling for growth. So, in mid-2024, we restructured our leadership and teams around three pillars:

- Leadership and accountability:** This ensures every manager and team member knows who is responsible for specific outcomes. When a crew leader understands their "seat on the bus" and the project budget, they and their team perform at a much higher level. By creating a clear chain of command, the team focuses on their craft rather than wondering who is in charge.

- Standardized communication:** This is our company's plumbing. If communication is clogged or leaking, the project loses pressure. To help solve the problem, we implemented a digital project management system that serves as our "single source of truth." Documenting every design detail, utility location and client preference prevents the costly rework that stems from guesswork or verbal misunderstandings.
- Cultural alignment and "the fit":** Along the way, I've learned that a person with an average skill set but a phenomenal attitude is more valuable than a toxic expert. You can't teach passion in our industry. A person either has it or they don't. Alignment means every employee understands our mission to create natural masterpieces and shares the desire to create epic experiences for our clients. If a team member doesn't feel a sense of pride when the water turns on for the first time, they aren't a good fit.

Identify & Define Values

The epicenter of rebuilding is core values. For a long time, I had ideas in my head about how we should work, but they weren't written down where the team could see them. To ensure everyone is on the same page, we had to change that. First — and together — we had to define what the company's values are.

A company's core values aren't just pretty words printed on a flyer and posted in the employee lunchroom. Neither are they top-down directives. Core values are no-compromise behavioral standards. They are organizational filters that ensure everyone is aligned on the ways of working that support company growth and protect the brand's reputation.

To begin defining our core values, we first looked at our most successful team members. They're the ones who stay late without being asked, mentor



To move from a job-to-job mindset into a team-oriented legacy company, we rebuilt our leadership and then focused on our team.

Reflections Core Values

Valores Fundamentales de Reflections

Our core values are in our name:

<p>RESPECT & SERVE OTHERS No Room for Selfishness Gossip Kills Serve in Gratitude</p> <p>ELEVATE THOSE AROUND YOU Teach & Inspire Others Be a Leader</p> <p>FIND SOLUTIONS, NOT PROBLEMS There is a Solution for Each Problem Take Action Get it Done</p> <p>LEAVE MEDIOCRITY AT THE DOOR Be Excellent Always Learn Life is Too Short There are No Hacks Do the Work</p> <p>EXTREME OWNERSHIP Own Your Mistakes Higher Standards Discipline Brings Freedom</p> <p>COUNT THE WINS You will Lose, but Win More Small Wins Lead to Bigger Wins The War is Won with Small Battles</p> <p>TEAMWORK Be Effective and Efficient Work Together to Achieve Goals</p>	<p>RESPECTAR Y SERVIR A LOS DEMÁS No hay lugar para el egoísmo El chisme se mata Servir en gratitud</p> <p>ELEVA A QUIENES TE RODEAN Enseñar e inspirar a otros Sé un líder</p> <p>ENCUENTRE SOLUCIONES, NO PROBLEMAS Hay una solución para cada problema Tomar acción Hazlo y terminalo</p> <p>DEJA LA MEDIOCRIDAD EN LA PUERTA Ser excelente Siempre aprende La vida es demasiado corta No hay trucos Haz el trabajo</p> <p>TOMAR POSESIÓN DE SUS ACCIONES Sé dueño de tus errores Estándares más altos La disciplina trae libertad</p> <p>CUENTA LAS GANANCIAS Perderás, pero ganarás más Pequeñas victorias conducen a mayores La guerra se gana con pequeñas batallas</p> <p>TRABAJO EN EQUIPO Ser efectivo y eficiente Trabajar juntos para lograr metas</p>
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Core values are no-compromise organizational standards. They are strategic filters by which all operations, procedures and plans are determined and measured.

teammates and new hires, and consistently find solutions to problems.

Once values were defined from those character traits and others, we identified them as values — our shared belief in our brand and how we run our busi-

ness. Today, we look for evidence of our core values during new-hire interviews.

For example, if a candidate hasn't learned a new skill in years, they won't fit our value of "continuous learning," no matter how well they operate a

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The most complex ecosystem we will ever build in our industry isn't made of water and stone. It's made of people.

skid steer. Turning away talent that doesn't mirror our values requires discipline, but it prevents infighting that breaks companies, especially during busy seasons.

Culture as a Living Ecosystem

In our trade industry, culture is visceral. It's the vibe in the truck and how the crew reacts when a pump fails at 5 p.m. on a Friday. A healthy culture is self-policing. When everyone on the team knows the standard and believes in it, the team begins to manage itself. If a new hire cuts corners or complains excessively, veteran team members will either pull that person up to the standard or push them out.

As a result of our rebuilding, my role is changing. As the company's president, my job is shifting from "chief problem solver" to "chief culture officer." I realized early on that if I protect the company's culture, the team handles the projects.

On the other hand, if I focus only on the projects, I get stuck solving the same personnel problems over and over again. You cannot force a

healthy business culture. But you can create an environment — through transparency and rewarding clearly defined successes — where health is the only option.

Challenges of the Rebuild

Rebuilding a team this way is a slow, continual process and, without doubt, it is painful. Along the way, we had to acknowledge that not everyone who helped us get to where we are would be joining us in the future. Realizing that some people are "seasonal" along the journey of success is the hardest part of business ownership.

If you have a manager who is technically brilliant but refuses to adapt to new technologies or communication methods, or treats others disrespectfully, you cannot keep that person on the payroll. There's simply not a right seat for them on the bus. Putting them on the bus anyway tells the rest of the team that your values are merely suggestions.

Conversely, we are finding that productivity increases when values are upheld because emotion is removed from decision-making. Leadership has to be the first to commit to rebuilding and understanding what is good for the culture they wish to build. That requires the courage to prioritize the health of the whole over the talent of one.

Invest in Human Assets

It's easy to justify spending thousands of dollars on a new excavator because the return on investment is immediate. It is harder to justify spending time and resources on team training and leadership seminars. But the excavator doesn't represent the company's brand to the customer, nor does it innovate a new way to hide a skimmer. People do.

In our company, team investment is now a mandatory budget line item. We provide growth opportunities because we want people to build careers with us, not just hold jobs. Developing reward and acknowledgment systems



When team members understand their roles and are in the right "seat on the bus," they perform at much higher level.


is an investment that pays off in cohesive teams, brand loyalty and positive morale.

For us, this also includes cross-training. Having construction crews learn design and designers spend time in the mud, for example, helps everyone understand the realities of design and construction. That builds the empathy necessary to solve problems naturally.

The Long View

In landscape design, a mature tree with an established root system can withstand storms that would easily topple shallower plants. A values-driven team operates on that same principle: The deeper the internal connection, the greater the external resilience. Once core values are defined, the technical aspects of day-to-day work are easier to manage.

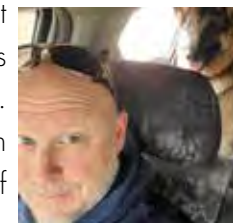
People are the heartbeat of our business. Everything else is just plumbing. For our shop, rebuilding lifted the growth ceiling and gave us the tools to take on projects with greater confidence in one another and the team.

Rebuilding for success starts by identifying what the company stands for — then hiring the people who stand for the same thing. As we all know in this business, if the culture is right, healthy water always follows. 

About the Author

Larry Carnes is 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.



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FROM JOBSITE TO SPOTLIGHT



Why industry awards matter

A deeper dive with an awards writer

by **Zara Graham,**
Zara Graham Consulting

Awards are rarely urgent. They sit in the background as a feel-good endeavor to get to later. After this job. After the next one. When things slow down. Next year.

Without the right processes and mindset, next year often does not come.

I have worked with pond builders since 2019, across different business sizes, regions and approaches to craftsmanship. Hesitation around awards

may have different names, but it often comes from the same place.

Most pond builders do not avoid awards because they doubt the quality of their work. They avoid them because they are busy, because the process feels vague, because it sits outside the rhythms of business and construction, and because it asks them to step back and look at their work in a way they are not used to doing.

Awards ask designers and builders to hold their work up to someone else's. While inviting comparison can be deeply confronting, it is rarely about

ego. The leading cause for inaction is not being convinced where the effort leads. If the only positive outcome is seen to be winning a category, what are the chances your efforts will be rewarded?

There are complex benefits to entering your projects into industry awards. It is worth being honest about what awards are, what they can be, and why it's much bigger than you think.

What Awards Actually Do at an Industry Level

Awards are often discussed as individual achievements, but their bigger impact is collective. They shape how the industry is seen from the outside.

Every strong submission helps raise awareness of what water features can be. Not just aesthetically, but functionally and experientially. Even now, many people still have a narrow idea of what a pond is. Awards help expand that understanding by putting real projects, real decisions and real outcomes in front of a broader audience, educating clients even before a pond contractor is contacted.

The way projects are categorized, titled and described shapes what home and business owners learn to search for in the first place. Someone looking to include water in their landscape may start with a vague idea, but what they type into a search bar depends entirely on what they know is possible. For example, natural pools and recreation ponds are not interchangeable terms. Without industry-led examples that go beyond brand or build style, the average person may not realize those distinctions exist.

When award-recognized projects are shared through industry bodies with a wider audience, they help educate people before a conversation even begins. Clients arrive with better questions, clearer expectations and a stronger understanding of scale, function and style. That shift makes a tangible difference to the quality of inquiries and alignment between client and pond builder.



Taylor'd Waterscapes feature Halcyon Falls was entered into a Commercial category in Landscape Queensland Construction Excellence Awards. It's now on the Taylor'd Waterscapes website as a project profile and was written about in long form in Pond Trade's Contractors Corner, January 2026.



Nulla enjoying her Award-Winning Recreation Pond by Pete Merten at Organic Pools and Queensland Landscaping Services during the Aquascape Open Pond Tour, February 2025.



From the water's edge. An award-winning recreation pond by Taylor'd Waterscapes, captured by Greg Taylor. Residential winner at Landscape Queensland's Construction Excellence Awards, 2025.

A Digital Layer

There is a digital layer to awards that is often overlooked, particularly by those who have grown their businesses through reputation and word of mouth.

Search behavior and consumer behavior have changed. It is no longer just about being found, but about being understood. When award-recognized projects are published through established industry bodies, they become part of a wider, ongoing digital record of the work being done in the industry. These features generate high-quality links back to the businesses involved and form part of a long-term digital footprint, or evergreen content, that continues to support those businesses well beyond the awards cycle itself.

More importantly, contributing to industry platforms places a business within a broader digital conversation. Projects are tied to place, region and context through imagery, language and location data. For home and business owners searching locally, that context matters.

Someone may be looking for a natural pool, a formal pond or a recreation pond, without yet understanding how those options differ. Others may be searching for a Japanese water garden and not realize that streams or ponds could play a role in achieving that outcome. Industry-led examples help expand what people know to search for in the first place.

When work is shared through platforms with a wider audience, it helps search engines and AI-driven systems connect a pond builder's work with place, style and intent. Over time, this visibility communicates not just what a business builds, but how they think and what they value. It works steadily in the background, improving alignment between clients and pond builders before a conversation even begins.

Awards entries do not just reward work. They help set the benchmark for what quality looks like.

Choosing Where to Submit Your Work

Not all awards programs are the same,



The weathered timber waterfall feature, sourced on site, in Daniel Taylor's Lake MacDonald Ecosystem Pond and Stream. This feature was recognised in a Residential Category at the 2024 Landscape Queensland Construction Excellence Awards.

and not all platforms assess work through the same lens.

Understanding who is judging and what they are judging against matters. With established, reputable, industry-led awards programs, the panel of judges will have industry experience, and the criteria will require data points such as challenges,

client brief and outcomes, among other things.

Localized industry awards may include site visits, which invite another level of scrutiny. If you provide quality work, it serves to further reinforce your authority.

Industry-specific awards, judged by people who understand water, ecology,

landscaping, construction and long-term system performance, recognize things that may not be immediately visible in a photograph.

It is not about how impressive the project looks on its own. It is about how clearly the submission responds to the criteria and to the quality of work.

This is where industry platforms such as POND Trade Magazine or your regional landscaping association play an important role. They understand the nuance of the work and the decisions that sit beneath the surface.

Where Most People Get Stuck

A common misconception is that awards are something you do once your business is polished and ready. Bigger. Older.

Nonsense.

In established, industry-led awards programs, the assessment focuses solely on the quality of work and responses to criteria, which live quite separately from your business.

In saying that, the businesses that navigate awards most effectively are usually the ones who have already built the habit of documenting their work as they go.

Project profiles are not just for awards. They underpin websites, quoting processes, client education, social content, broader marketing and media features. Builders who have these assets in place are prepared when opportunities arise.

This kind of readiness is not accidental. It comes from treating documentation as part of the job, not an optional extra.

That shift alone changes how a business presents itself, with or without awards.

Highlighting Your Approach to Design

Pond builders come in many forms. I often find that the reason people start building ponds shows up clearly in their work.

When it comes to picking projects for awards, my advice is simple: Choose the projects that highlight your points of difference.

Some pond builders are nuts about fish and design with them in mind. Fish caves, breeding zones, rock shelves, water lilies and other aquatic plants for shelter, feeding spots and clear viewing points. There are turtle people. Tropical plant people. Health and well-being people. Those who seek to rewild. Some draw inspiration from gorges and cenotes. Others love a formal finish. Some insist on endemic species only, while others enjoy a party pump and colored lighting. Most are a combination.

A clear example of this can be seen in the work of Daniel Taylor and his team at Taylor'd Waterscapes. After a couple of years supporting their awards entries and various communication projects, I can confidently say

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Upper Ponding area with a Saratoga viewing Perspex window at Lanthir Lamath, Waterfall of Echoing Voices. This feature was designed and built for the Queensland Garden Expo by Caleb McKinnon of Swell Landscape Design. Earlier covered in Contractor's Corner September 2025.



Daniel Taylor on "Bum Rock" at Award Winning Lake Macdonald Stream and Pond during the Aquascape Open Pond Tour, February 2025.



Overhead view of Taylor'd Waterscapes' Moffatt Beach Project, a Pondless Stream and Recirculating Outdoor Shower inspired by their Garden Expo Display. Earlier covered in Contractor's Corner July 2025.

their designs consistently focus on two things: the human experience of ponds and circularity.

The projects they showcase include multiple seating rocks in and around the pond, step-pers and clear pathways that encourage people to move through and engage with the space.

Of all the designs I have seen of theirs, there is always a wide, flat rock positioned by a key element in the water feature. If I get the chance to visit one of their projects, I know what to look for. I call it "the search for bum rock." It is never disappointing.

With Daniel's background in music, waterfalls are treated as both a visual and audio sensory element, tapping into the restorative qualities of being near running water.

In terms of circularity, materials such as weathered logs and tree stumps sourced from the property or nearby sites are repurposed into falls and retaining walls. Using dug rather than blasted stone further sets these water features apart — the natural rock with weathered faces, their aged surface texture retained and patterned with lichen.

Identifying these approaches within your own work sets you apart and communicates your value long before the initial consult.

Established industry awards are an excellent way to hone your understanding of and communication around your own unique approach to designing and delivering quality water features. While that clarity may turn some clients away, they are often people who were looking for something different.

The clients who connect

with your design style are the ones who value it most. It shifts the conversation from "how much" to "how can we welcome this into our environment."

Why Narrative Matters

Awards create space to tell the full story of a project.

Not just the finished result, but the process. The constraints. The decisions. The problems that had to be solved along the way.

This is often where the real value sits. Strong narratives show how a pond builder thinks, how they respond to complexity and how they work with clients and other trades. For many potential clients, that insight is invaluable.

In practice, it is often the challenges that make a project compelling.

If You Do Not Win

There is a tendency to treat awards as all or nothing. Win or fail.

Becoming a finalist is significant. In industry-led awards, it means the work has been assessed by industry professionals and recognized as award-worthy. That recognition can be used across a business in project profiles, client conversations and future submissions.

It also provides perspective. Pond builders gain a clearer sense of where their work sits within the industry and where they may want to refine or double down on their approach.

But What If You Do

Winning brings its own outcomes. Teams feel proud. Collaborators and suppliers share in the recognition. Visibility increases, both within the industry and beyond it.

Awards also reinforce authority. They make future conversations easier and give clients confidence that they are choosing someone whose work stands up to scrutiny.

At a broader level, they contribute

to an industry culture where quality is articulated, visible and valued.

Awards Are a Business Tool

Awards are not about ego. They are not about comparison for comparison's sake. They are one of the ways business and industry align to show their work, educate clients and raise the bar.

When approached with intent, awards become less about winning and more about participation in a larger conversation about craft, quality and creativity.

That conversation is how the industry moves forward. Slowly, unevenly, and through the people willing to put their work forward, knowing that by contributing, they have already won. ☞

About the Author

Zara Graham is an Operations & Development Consultant with a specialty in Pond Building businesses.



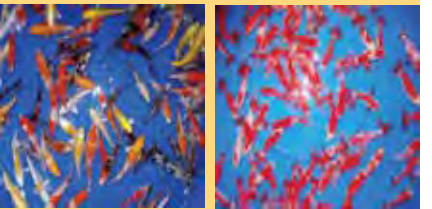
Starting Zara Graham Consulting in 2020, she first worked with ponds from the client's side of Waterscapes Australia's Lake Gkula project in 2019 and has been working with pond builders ever since. With a holistic approach to creating lasting business solutions, awards writing and article writing are just a few ways she helps business owners communicate their value and connect to wider audiences. Based in Australia, she supports specialist trades and service-based business owners all over the world.

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A balance of colors, textures and elevations create harmony in this pondless waterfall project.

THE LIVING PALETTE

How skillful planting transforms water features

by James Hiestand,
DreamScapes

Planting within and around natural water features and fountainscapes can be one of the most impactful and rewarding phases of any project. Whether contemporary or naturalistic, small or expansive, plants play essential roles in both the function and beauty of a living water ecosystem.

Functionally, plants help keep water clean by absorbing nutrients that algae would otherwise feed on. Aesthetically, their colors, textures and elevations can be used to direct attention, create privacy, soften edges,



The DreamScape Pond and Landscape we created at Diplos house in Malibu looked like this after only one year of growth!

and either invite or restrict access to the water. Most importantly, plants establish the tone, energy and emotional character of a water feature.

Understanding the Role of Plants in Naturalistic Design

To create truly naturalistic water features and landscapes, plant selection and placement must be treated with the same level of importance as stone selection and placement.



These sun, wind and drought tolerant native plants are excellent at attracting and sustaining local pollinators, birds and dragonflies.

Industry experts such as Brian Helfrich of Aquascape frequently emphasize this principle in advanced training workshops, encouraging landscapers to cover as much of the edging rock as possible with plant material. When plantings are allowed to mature, only the primary character boulders remain visible within the waterfalls, reinforcing a more authentic, natural look.

Over time, the collective presence of plantings creates a unique identity—an evolving personality—for each project. These landscapes are living systems. They grow, change and develop greater character year after year.

Plants also play a vital ecological role. They attract and sustain pollinators such as bees and butterflies, as well as dragonflies, birds and small wildlife. Thoughtful plant selection can create what might be described as a “hometown buffet,” for local birds and pollinators offering a diverse range of flowers and foliage that supports local wildlife.

Beyond function, plants give a water feature its sense of place. They can evoke a tropical jungle, forested ravine, desert oasis, contemporary courtyard, English cottage garden or Japanese Zen retreat. The goal is to allow the planting style to guide the emotional and visual experience of the space. I often call my desired planting style here in Los Angeles - “California Zen”.

Plants set the tone and energy for the entire outdoor environment—whether lush and tropical or sparse and drought-tolerant. Harmony is key. Plants that would not naturally grow together should not be paired, such as succulents with lush, semi-tropical varieties.

When placed skillfully, plants complete the illusion of real nature and elevate a water feature to an entirely new level of realism.



Soften edges and highlight the main character boulders in your falls with short tough plants that can grow in soil or water.

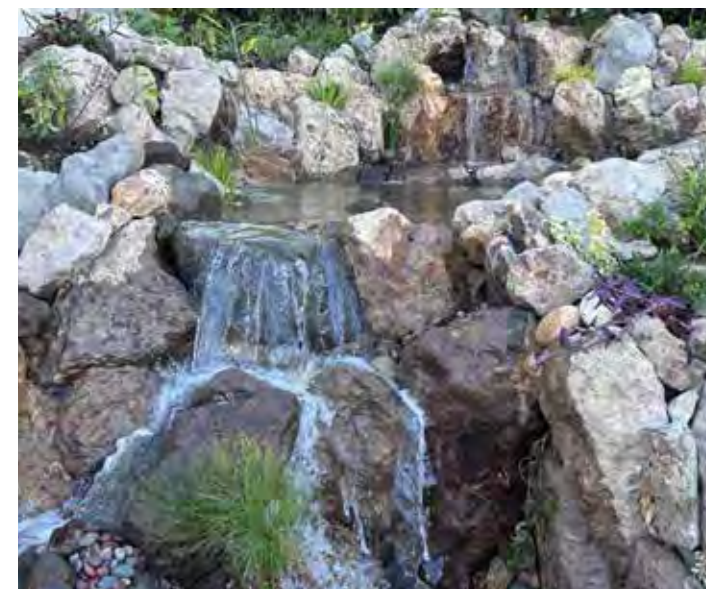
Planting Within and Around the Water Feature

In successful projects, planting occurs both within and around the water feature to create the look and feel of authentic nature. This requires working with plants that thrive in dry soil, wet soil and directly in water.

This approach blurs the lines between aquatic and terrestrial spaces, making the feature feel fully integrated into its surroundings. Plants growing within the stream or pond, along with those in the adjacent borders, create a seamless visual and ecological transition.

Frequently used plants for these environments include chocolate mint (other mints are invasive), yellow carex sweet flag, juncus, water iris, dwarf philodendron, canna lily and cyperus papyrus.

Because we like to plant in all of the small soil pockets and crevices around a pond, using smaller 4" and ground cover flat plants can



A pondless waterfall with the pool in the middle. This is day 1 of the plantings getting nestled in the waterfall and surrounding borders.



We use plants to hide the edges which highlights and frames the main falls.

be very helpful. This not only gives us a ton of plants at a small cost to work with, but it allows us to put in plants into difficult and small locations.

Involving Clients in the Design Process

After 33 years of designing and creating outdoor living spaces, I have learned the value of inviting my clients to participate in the development of their plant list. Encouraging client participation helps ensure that each project reflects both sound design principles and personal taste.

I begin by creating a master list organized into five categories: trees, shrubs, plants, ground covers and vines. I intentionally include more plants than I plan to use, giving clients a wide range of options to consider.

When I email the list, I ask clients to search each plant online



Same waterfall pictured on the left with plantings in full bloom!

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Cascadia Falls in full bloom.

and provide feedback using a simple system: red light means no, yellow light means maybe and green light means they love it. This process invites clients into the creative journey and allows their personal taste to shape their own private paradise.

Once feedback is received, the final plant list can be refined and a suggested budget developed for this phase of the project.

Plant placement, however, is best handled by experienced professionals. Successful landscapes are installed with short-, medium- and long-term growth in mind so that they look strong on day one and continue to improve over time.

Budgeting for Maximum Impact

After finalizing the plant list, a suggested budget can be developed based on plant sizes and quantities. Most clients agree with my recommendations, but if they want to spend more or less, that is always their choice.

While the planting phase is often the least expensive part of a project, it produces some of the most dramatic long-term results as the landscape matures, while also providing additional revenue. Over the years, I have had several projects where I earned more from the planting phase than from the water feature itself.

Additionally, proper irrigation is a critical component of long-term success and should never be omitted. Without it, even the best plant selections will struggle to thrive.



These native plantings at the Mirman School encourage students to study, while immersed in nature.

Why Formal Planting Plans Are Not Always Necessary

Unless required for HOA approval or city permitting, detailed planting plans are not always necessary. Being compelled to plant following a 2d plan constrains creativity and is not as effective as placing all the plants myself, from tallest (trees) to shortest (ground covers).

On-site placement allows designers to work organically, arranging plants by hand. I recommended that plants be installed from largest to smallest: 5-gallon stock first, followed by 1-gallon plants, 4-inch plants and finally ground cover flats.

This approach allows for a harmonized blend of colors, textures and elevations while staying true to a single unified design theme.

When formal plans are required, they can be developed for an additional fee depending on the level of detail needed. Many professionals prefer hand-drawn plans for this process, as the number of small plant varieties often makes detailed digital plans impractical. However, there are software programs that exist for this, should a designer choose to use them.

Municipalities, property managers and HOAs may also require compliance with approved or restricted plant lists, which should be always reviewed before finalizing selections.



Also the school, different angle. Note how the low plantings are around the perimeter of the pond and how they preserve the view.

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Planting smaller plants preserves the view, while planting medium and larger plants on the side and back of the pond conceal the edges.

Principles of Placement

Plant placement can be organized into three general size categories:

- **Short (1 inch to 1 foot):** Creeping plants placed in front and along edges to soften transitions without blocking views.
- **Medium (1 to 3 feet):** Positioned along the sides and upper portions of waterfalls.
- **Tall (3 to 12 feet):** Shrubs and ornamental or shade trees placed behind or on the side of the water feature.

Balancing texture should also be prioritized. The five primary texture groups are:

- **Busy** (small leaves, such as sages)
- **Spiky** (flax, Dietes vegeta)
- **Big leaf** (philodendron, canna)
- **Whispy** (ferns)
- **Creeping** (polygonum, rosemary)

Overusing any one texture can make a landscape feel flat. Balance ensures visual interest and natural harmony.

The Case for Drip Irrigation

Drip irrigation is one of the most effective methods for watering plants around water features. In regions with strict watering restrictions, such as Southern California, drip systems offer a compliant and highly efficient solution compared to traditional sprinklers or sprayers. However, regardless of location, builders should always consider their local climate, seasonal rainfall patterns and USDA planting zones when designing irrigation systems.

Broadcast watering can waste up to 70% of water through misting and evaporation, and what does reach the ground often penetrates only a half-inch to 1 inch into the soil before running off. Drip irrigation delivers water directly to the base of each plant, allowing it to percolate slowly and deeply. This encourages roots to chase the water and grow downward, resulting in stronger, healthier plants and improved hillside stability over time.

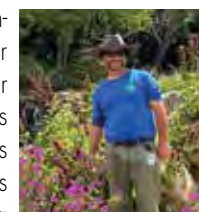


Designing for Life, Not Just for Looks

When planting is approached with the same intentionality as stonework, hydraulics and structural design, a water feature becomes more than a visual centerpiece—it becomes a living, evolving ecosystem. Thoughtful plant selection, proper placement and regionally appropriate irrigation practices allow landscapes to mature naturally, gaining character and ecological value over time. For pond builders, planting is not a finishing touch; it is a foundational design element that defines the identity, longevity and emotional impact of every project. When plants and water are designed to work together, the result is a space that feels authentic, resilient and truly alive. ☘

About the Author

James Hiestand has been designing and creating award-winning outdoor living spaces with water features for over 33 years in California and Oregon. He is the owner and operator of DreamScapes Water Features and Landscaping LLC in Los Angeles, CA. His passion for connecting people with Nature's Healing Energy translates into every unique DreamScape. In 2010, James became a Certified Aquascape Contractor and has since worked his way up to becoming a Master CAC. Proficient at creating Fountainscapes, Natural Pondless Waterfalls, Ponds and Recreation Swimming Ponds, James designs and installs only one DreamScape at a time. www.DreamScapesComeTrue.com



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Angels Trumpet -
Brugmansia Datura
(toxic to dogs)

GROUND COVERS:

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Chocolate Mint
Campanula
Viola
Vinca minor
Spider Plant

SHRUBS:

Cyperus Papyrus
Philadendron large
and small
Hibiscus
Duranta Variegated
Echium Variegated
Ceanothus
Abutilons
Hydrangea

WATER PLANTS:

Lillies

WATER AND SOIL PLANTS:

Dwarf Philadendron
Cyperus Papyrus (all sizes)
Ruelia
Carex Yellow
Sweetflag
Creeping Jenny
Chocolate Mint
Polygonum Pink
Clover
Juncus
Water Iris

PLANTS:

Sages (many varieties)
Agapanthus
Gauria
Leonotis
Rosemary
Plectranthus
Tradescantia
Lamium
Yarrow
Helicrysum Yellow
Anigozanthos

VINES:

Bouganvillea
Black Eyed Susan
Jasmine
Honeysuckle
Grape

INVASIVE PLANTS TO AVOID:

Any kind of mint other than
Chocolate
Egyptian Paper Plant - Papyrus
Pampass Grasses
Water lettuce



Butterfly Koi

More than just
pretty fins



by **Ellen Kloubec,**
Kloubec Koi Farm

If you've spent more than a minute around koi ponds (and let's face it, most pond builders spend way more than a minute), you've likely seen graceful koi with long, flowing fins that glide like dancers beneath the water's surface. These are usually the fish that make clients stop mid-sentence and point. Butterfly koi have

a way of doing that, adding movement and elegance that immediately draw the eye.

Butterfly koi, also known as longfin koi (Hirenaga in Japanese), are not a separate species but a variation of Nishikigoi distinguished by elongated fins. Because of their flowing finnage, they are sometimes assumed to be fragile. When bred intentionally, they grow, thrive and perform just like traditional koi, offering pond builders another design element without compromising health or longevity.

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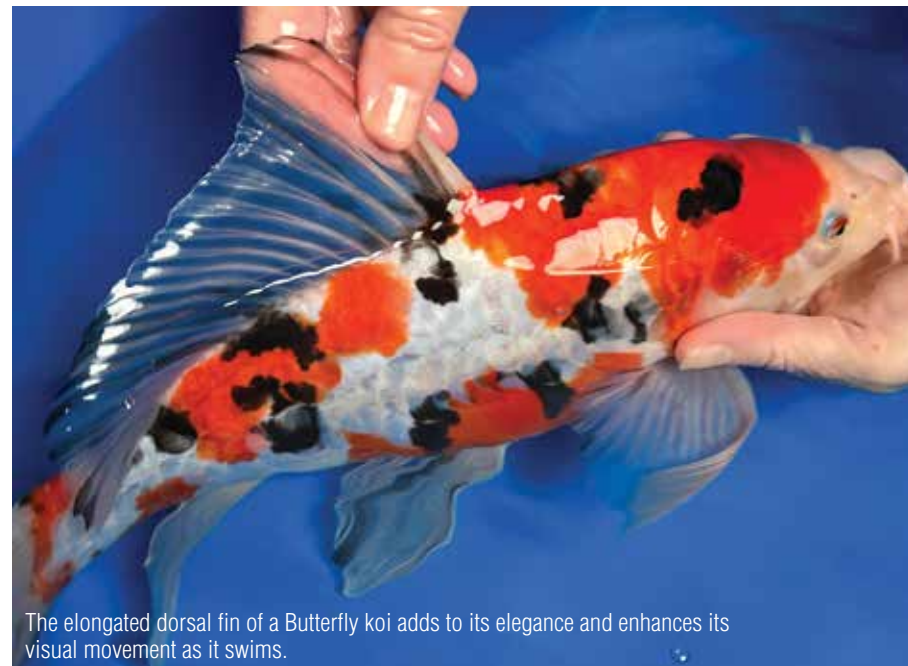
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The elongated dorsal fin of a Butterfly koi adds to its elegance and enhances its visual movement as it swims.

**From Novelty to Refined:
The Evolution of Butterfly
Koi**

Early Butterfly koi production emphasized fin and tail length, often at the expense of fin structure and overall proportion. Over time, responsible breeders learned that true beauty comes from balance. Today's high-quality Butterfly koi reflect identifiable varieties with strong body conformation, vibrant color and fins that complement the fish rather than overwhelm it.

Modern judging standards developed by the American Koi Judges

Association recognize Butterfly koi as their own class while still holding them to traditional koi benchmarks. These standards emphasize proportion, movement and harmony — not simply the longest fins.

Approximately, 20 years ago, we at Kloubec Koi Farm, were asked to contribute to the development of the AKA Longfin Judging standards. We were honored to lend a hand, or a fin. That collaboration reinforced an important principle: Like most points of appreciation in koi, balance is paramount, and fins are no exception.



Butterfly koi are known for their large, graceful caudal (tail) fin, which contribute to their distinctive, flowing appearance in the water.

**Traditional Koi vs.
Butterfly Koi: Same
Foundation, Different
Emphasis**

Traditional koi and Butterfly koi share the same foundation and can be found in many of the same familiar varieties, including Kohaku, Sanke, Asagi, Yamabuki and more. Butterfly koi are also produced with backyard pond owners in mind, including popular Gin Rin scalation, adding a little extra visual sparkle that catches light and draws attention without overpowering the fish.

Doitsu types are just as captivating, with large, prominent scales adding another visual dimension, and Butterfly koi are also produced with this scale variation.

Some pond owners also enjoy incorporating koi based on cultural traditions, such as the belief that a black koi brings good luck. This is an idea rooted in Japanese folklore and personal preference rather than pond design requirements.

Koi are evaluated on health, body conformation, color quality and overall balance. Traditional koi place the greatest emphasis on body conformation, while Butterfly koi add a heightened emphasis on fin and tail development and proportion.

Butterfly koi are not defined by elongated pectoral fins alone. All fins are extended to varying degrees, including the caudal (tail), dorsal (top), ventral pair and anal fins. The pectoral fins should form a near-matching



Two Yamabuki Ogon koi shown for comparison—a Butterfly koi on the left and a standard-fin koi on the right. The Butterfly koi displays noticeably longer, flowing fins. The extended pectoral fins are an immediate identifying feature of Butterfly koi.

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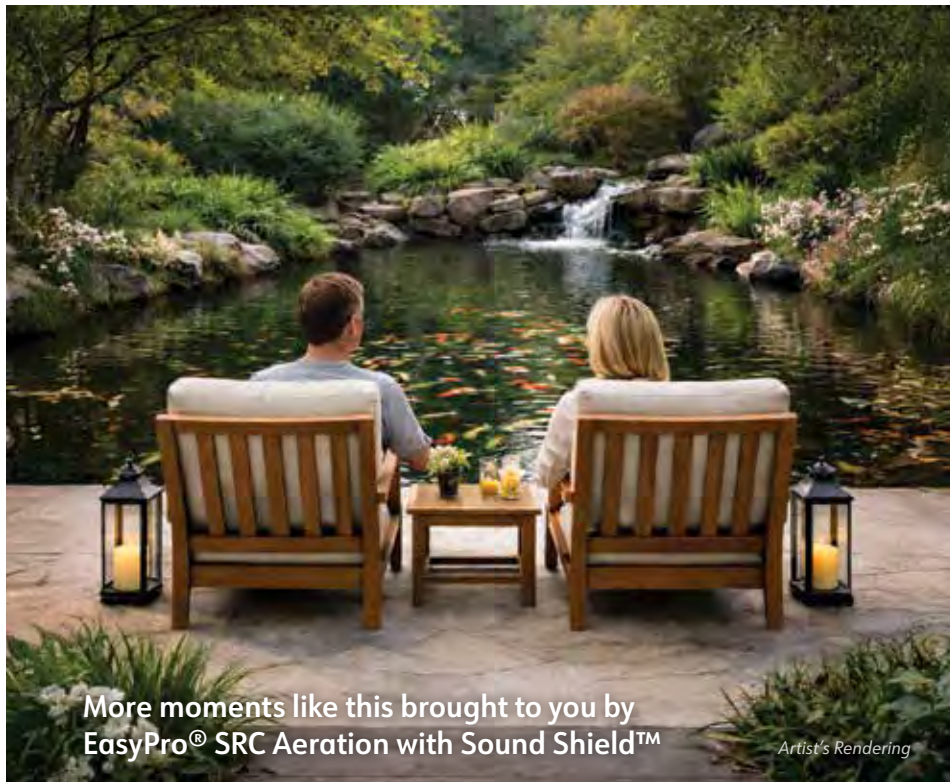


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Butterfly koi are produced in a wide range of varieties at Kloubec Koi Farm, combining traditional colors and patterns with long-fin characteristics.

pair, well-proportioned to the body and to one another. All elongated fins are attributes of the fish and work together to complement overall balance and create a unified and beautiful silhouette.

Butterfly Koi as Living Design Elements

Butterfly koi bring something to a pond that goes beyond color and pattern, they bring dramatic movement. Their elongated fins interact with currents, waterfalls and open swimming lanes in a way traditional koi simply do not.

In professionally designed ponds, Butterfly koi occupy the full water column, gliding beneath the surface and adding a dynamic aesthetic that enhances the overall pond experience. For pond builders, this means the fish themselves become part of the design, reinforcing flow lines and adding visual interest even when the pond is otherwise still.

What Pond Owners Notice Over Time

Graceful fins slow the eye, drawing attention to movement rather than just size or color. Over time, many hobbyists form a genuine attachment to their koi. As the fish become familiar with their surroundings

and routines, it's not uncommon for them to recognize their owners and even accept food directly from a hand, further strengthening the connection between pond owner and pond.

For pond builders, this kind of ongoing interaction transforms a completed project into a lasting experience — one that continues to deliver enjoyment, conversation and value long after construction is finished.

Butterfly Koi and Breeding Programs

Butterfly koi trace their origins to early longfin introductions, and breeders worldwide have played a role in shaping how the type is bred today. Selective breeding has increasingly emphasized fin structure, symmetry and overall balance while maintaining identifiable varieties.

As an American koi breeder, we focus on producing Butterfly koi that perform reliably in retail settings and in U.S. pond environ-



A Kumonryu Butterfly koi photographed prior to listing at KloubecKoi.com.

ments, supporting the needs of pond builders, retailers and their customers.

Separating Myth From Reality


One of the most persistent misconceptions about Butterfly koi is that their elegant appearance makes them delicate or weak. In reality, Butterfly koi are just as hardy as traditional koi when bred, raised and handled properly.

Another common misconception is that Butterfly koi do not grow as large or as robust as traditional koi. The extended length of the fins and tail can create the visual impression of a slimmer fish, even when overall body size and mass are comparable.

Why Sourcing Matters for Pond Professionals

For pond builders, koi sourcing is not just a design decision — it is also a long-term risk-management consideration. Health consistency, acclimation, and predictable performance all play important roles in how a pond system matures over time.

Professionals who prioritize stable breeding practices, proper conditioning and thoughtful selection are better positioned to deliver long-term success for their clients. In this way, fish choice becomes part of the broader system design — not an afterthought.

Sourcing koi that are well-adapted to local climates, water conditions and seasonal changes can help reduce stress on fish, support longevity and improve the overall experience for pond owners. 

At Kloubec Koi Farm, all standard koi and Butterfly koi are bred, raised and conditioned under direct care, supported by 80+ acres of earthen ponds and over 300,000 gallons of indoor growing capacity. This allows for year-round supply of healthy, stable fish.

Each koi is carefully packaged and shipped overnight, arriving healthy and ready for acclimation—pond-side or at retail locations. All Kloubec koi are KHV-free certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The result: healthier koi, fewer variables and long-term success for the ponds you build.

Learn more: "Judging Longfin – The Evolution Continues" kloubeckoi.com/longfin-koi-judging-guide support@kloubeckoi.com

Read or download: AKCA judging paper "Judging Longfin – The Evolution Continues" at: <https://www.kloubeckoi.com/longfin-koi-judging-guide.com>

For more information on koi fish and Butterfly koi, contact the author at support@kloubeckoi.com.

About the Author

Ellen Kloubec and her husband, Myron, began their aquaculture business in 1981, and their farm consists of 80-acres of mud-ponds. Together with their son, Nick, they raise and supply healthy & hardy koi to wholesale customers throughout the USA and Canada. Ellen loves all things koi. She enjoys Koi Shows & Watergarden Tradeshows where she has built lasting friendships. Many hobbyists and celebrities have relied on Ellen when looking for the perfect koi. Ellen hand-selected the Kloubec breeder fish while in Japan. The koi spawning season is her favorite time of year when the breeders are indoors in the hatchery. "Experimenting with different pairings is a passion. It's so rewarding to harvest beautiful little koi and see your vision come to life." Additionally, Ellen enjoys being with her family and their dogs, you'll even find pictures of them on the Kloubec website!



IWGS Announces Results of the 2025

New Waterlily **COMPETITION**



by Tim Jennings,
Longwood Gardens

A long-standing international benchmark, The International Waterlily & Water Gardening Society (IWGS) has announced the results of the 2025 New Waterlily Competition (NWC), held for the 27th time since its launch in 1997. Over the past nearly three decades, the competition has generated more than 200 entries and remains one of the most anticipated annual events in aquatic horticulture. The NWC continues to serve as a global plat-

form for evaluating new waterlily hybrids, recognizing advancements in breeding, performance and ornamental value across the water gardening industry.

Global Participation and Categories

The 2025 competition included contestants representing five countries, with new waterlily hybrids submitted in four categories: hardy, hardy intersubgeneric (ISG), tropical day-blooming and tropical night-blooming.

To ensure appropriate growing conditions for each class, the competition was divided between two cultivation sites. Hardy and hardy ISG waterlilies were grown at Latour-Marliac in France by grower Francisco Lopez. Tropical day-blooming and tropical night-blooming entries were cultivated at Naples Botanical Garden in Florida by grower Matt Herrman.

This dual-location model supports more accurate evaluation by allowing each category to be grown in climates suited to its growth habits and performance.

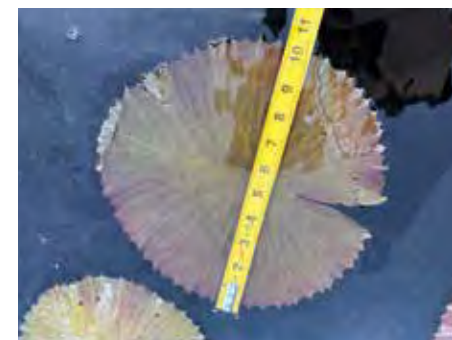
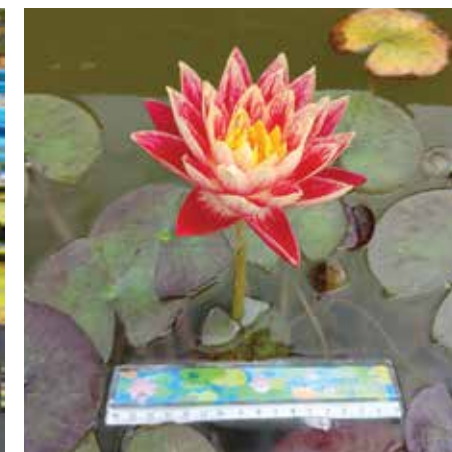
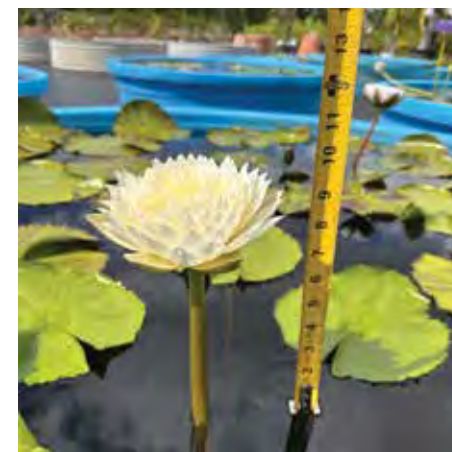
Judging Process and Evaluation

Entries were judged using images provided by both growers and hybridizers, along with brief plant descriptions submitted during registration. An international panel evaluated each submission based on flower quality, foliage, overall impression and

uniqueness of the plant.

The 2025 judging panel included professional waterlily growers, botanic garden specialists, hybridizers and experienced hobbyists:

- **Tomás Escribano**, IWGS board of directors, Spain
- **Marc Hachadourian**, New York Botanical Garden, United States
- **Steve Hampson**, United States
- **Andre Leu**, international director, Regeneration International, Australia
- **Marco Millet**, IWGS board of directors, Mexico
- **Rolf Nelson**, owner, Nelson Water Gardens & Nursery, United States
- **Richard Sacher**, hybridizer, United States
- **Jon Sander**, aquatic horticulturist, Glenstone Museum, United States
- **Jimmy Smith**, Atlanta Botanic Garden, United States
- **John Sou**, Water Garden Paradise, Australia



Images and data collection are critical in a virtual judging format, not only is the flower size important, but often how far a flower stands out of the water can be crucial information used by the judges. The foliage is another critical component looked at during the judging process, not only the size, but the shape, texture and color can be deciding factors.



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Best Overall New Waterlily

The Best Overall New Waterlily award was presented to Nymphaea 'Prueksakan' by Arun Kobkaew of Thailand. The cultivar also earned top honors in the Tropical Day-Blooming category.



1st - Hardy Waterlilies

Hardy Waterlilies

First place: Nymphaea 'Phoenixes' by Li Xiao (China)
Second place: Nymphaea 'I Love You' by Timo Gabriel (Germany)



2nd - Hardy Waterlilies



1st - Hardy Intersubgeneric (ISG) Waterlilies

Hardy Intersubgeneric (ISG) Waterlilies

First place: Nymphaea 'Ramata Kane' by Florian Henaux (France)
Second place: Nymphaea 'Aria' by Zijun Li (China)



2nd - Hardy Intersubgeneric (ISG) Waterlilies



1st - Tropical Night-Blooming Waterlilies

Tropical Night-Blooming Waterlilies

First place: Nymphaea 'Lucky Baby' by Manut Aree (Thailand)
Second place: Nymphaea 'Ruby Nocturne' by Wachira Singong (Thailand)



2nd - Tropical Night-Blooming Waterlilies



BEST OVERALL
1st - Tropical Day Blooming Waterlilies

Tropical Day-Blooming Waterlilies

First place: Nymphaea 'Prueksakan' by Arun Kobkaew (Thailand)
Second place: Nymphaea 'Iris' by Somchan Treesuwan (Thailand)



2nd - Tropical Day Blooming Waterlilies

Role of IWGS in Aquatic Plant Registration

In addition to organizing the New Waterlily Competition, IWGS serves as the official registrar for the genera Nymphaea and Nelumbo. The organization maintains a global repository of information related to water gardening, cultivar registration and aquatic plant development.

Industry professionals, hybridizers and hobbyists can access educational resources, past winners and registration information through the society's website.

Looking Ahead to the 2026 Competition

The IWGS is preparing for the 2026 New Waterlily Competition, which will feature entries in the following categories: Hardy, Hardy ISG, Tropical day-flowering and Tropical ISG.

Hybridizers interested in submitting new cultivars and those seeking information on past winners are encouraged to review competition details through IWGS resources. The society also extended its thanks to the growers, hybridizers and supporting institutions whose participation made the 2025 competition possible.

About the Author

Tim Jennings is a graduate of Longwood's Professional Horticulture Training Program and started working fulltime for Longwood in 1989 as the



curator of the aquatic collection. Today Tim continues to be involved in the care of the aquatic collection as one of the part time growers, and enjoys sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm with staff, students and homeowners in a way that is practical and user friendly. Tim has taught several popular water gardening courses at Longwood Gardens and has also served as a lab instructor for various plant identification classes.

Tim's former responsibilities also included the curation of Longwood's fern passage and indoor rose house prior to Longwood Reimagined.

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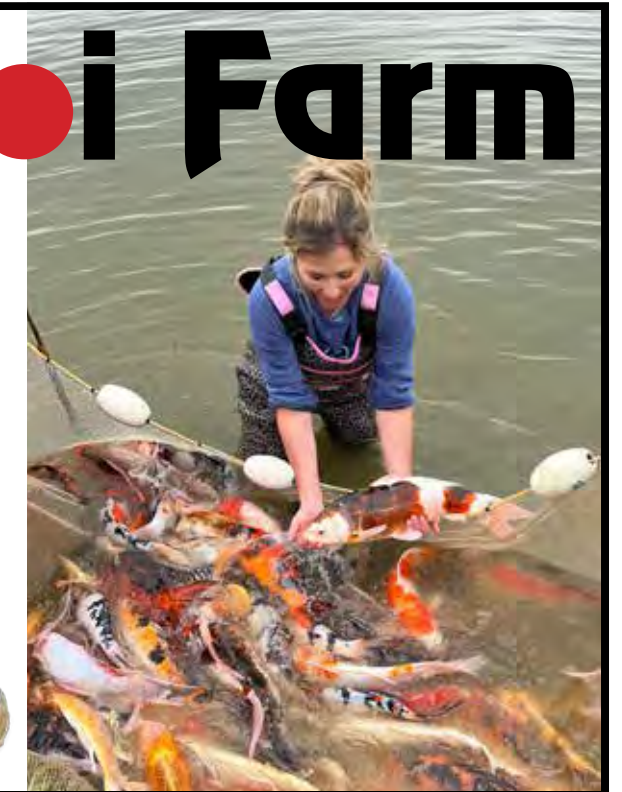


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The unsung powerhouse of lake maintenance

Why mismanaged cattails quietly destroy water quality

by **Patrick Simmsgeiger**,
Diversified Waterscapes Inc.

If you are serious about healthy, clear, low-maintenance lakes, bogs are not optional — they are essential. A properly designed and maintained bog is the closest thing you will ever have to a self-running, self-cleaning water quality system. Most people underestimate them, and that misunderstanding is exactly why so many lakes spiral into algae cycles, muck buildup, Lyngbya outbreaks and permanent chemical dependence.

A bog is not landscaping. It is biological infrastructure.

At its core, a bog is a shallow, plant-packed filtration zone built with gravel, controlled flow, oxygenated root systems and intentional

plant selection. Water is forced through dense gravel and root matrices where beneficial bacteria thrive. These bacteria break down dissolved nutrients and organic waste before they can accumulate as sludge or fuel algae.

This is why bogs outperform reactive treatments. They do not fight symptoms. They remove causes.

Bogs Starve Algae at the Source

Algae blooms are not a mystery. They are a nutrient problem — specifically nitrogen and phosphorus overload.

Inside a functioning bog, beneficial aerobic bacteria rapidly increase in population. Ammonia is converted and processed, dissolved nutrients are intercepted before they reach open



water, and algae lose their food source. When the biological engine is healthy, algae simply cannot compete. The lake stays balanced without constant intervention.

Bogs also improve water clarity continuously. As water moves through the gravel bed, suspended solids are trapped, fine particles are digested, and water exits visibly cleaner — without flocculants or chemical shortcuts. This is why the cleanest lakes and high-end water features rely on bogs as their backbone. The effect is constant, natural and cumulative.

Muck Reduction Only Happens When Oxygen Wins

Muck is not inevitable. It is the result of anaerobic failure.

Bogs dramatically increase aerobic bacterial activity, accelerating the decomposition of organic matter that would otherwise settle and rot. Over time, this reduces bottom sludge, odors, dredging frequency and shoreline decay. Bog plants also stabilize shorelines, limit erosion and convert nutrient-laden runoff into filtered water instead of sediment.

But here is the hard truth most people avoid: A bog is only as effective as the people maintaining it.

Landscapers Should Never Touch a Bog

Most landscapers do not understand bogs. To them, a bog looks like a decorative planting bed. They do not understand the pumps beneath the gravel, the plumbing layout, flow rates, oxygen requirements or the biological layers that make the system function.

When they step inside, pull plants or “clean it up,” they often destroy the filtration system without realizing it. Pumps are damaged. Plumbing cracks. Root systems —

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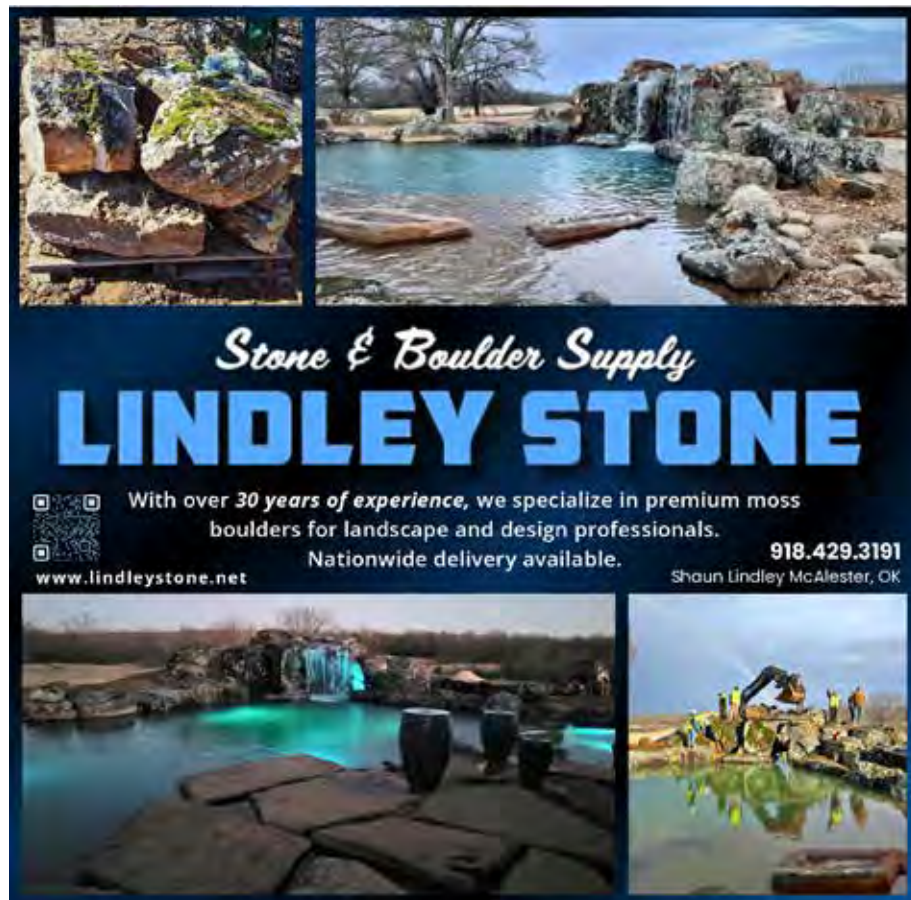
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the heart of the filter — are torn out. A thriving biological engine becomes a dead pit that no longer filters anything.

A bog must be treated like specialized equipment, not landscaping. Respect it, or expect failure.

The Role of Cattails: Powerful Tool or Silent Saboteur

Cattails are not neutral plants. They are either one of the most powerful nutrient-removal tools available or a long-term liability that feeds algae and Lyngbya. There is no middle ground.

Healthy cattails aggressively extract nitrogen, phosphorus, organic carbon and fine suspended solids — the exact nutrients that drive algae blooms and cyanobacteria dominance. But cattails only remove nutrients if the biomass is physically removed while the plant is alive.

Healthy removal equals nutrient export. Dead removal equals nutrient recycling.

During active growth in spring and summer, nutrients are locked into leaves, stalks and roots. Removing the plant during this phase exports nitrogen and phosphorus off-site and lowers the lake's nutrient load year over year. If cattails are left to die, cell walls rupture, nutrients leach back into the water and sediment, and an entire season of nutrient capture is undone. Next year's algae bloom is effectively pre-fertilized.

If someone says, "We'll cut them back in the fall," they do not understand lake ecology. Period.

Never Cut Cattails — Ever

Cutting cattails does not control them. It multiplies them.

Cattails spread primarily through rhizomes. When the tops are cut, apical dominance is removed and energy is redirected into lateral rhizome expansion. One plant becomes multiple plants within a single season. If the rootball remains, the infestation worsens — guaranteed.

The Non-negotiable Rule: Rootball Removal Every Two Years

Cattail management is not trimming. It is scheduled extraction.

The correct interval is every two years, and the entire rootball must be removed. Over time, cattail rootballs become dense nutrient reservoirs, anaerobic zones, phosphorus banks and organic carbon factories. By year three, they stop exporting nutrients and begin leaking them.

Miss this window and the system flips — from nutrient control to nutrient release. That is not maintenance. That is failure.

Why Rootballs Feed Lyngbya

Lyngbya thrives under very specific conditions: sediment-bound phosphorus, high organic carbon, low-oxygen micro-zones and stable nutrient release. Aging cattail rootballs create exactly that environment.

As root masses mature, oxygen levels drop within the rhizome matrix. Iron-bound phosphorus is released, organic carbon increases, and Lyngbya colonizes sediments and root surfaces. If Lyngbya appears near cattails, it is not coincidence. It is cause and effect.

- Cut cattails.
- Leave rootballs.
- Rootballs decay.
- Nutrients feed Lyngbya.
- Lyngbya stabilizes.
- What was once manageable becomes chronic.

Why Cattails Belong in Bogs — Not Unmanaged Shorelines

Inside a properly designed bog, flow is controlled, roots remain oxygenated, bacteria fully process nitrogen, and cattails act as nutrient pumps rather than nutrient traps. Outside bogs, sediments accumulate, roots go anaerobic, and plants create muck instead of preventing it.

Cattails are either an asset or a liability, depending entirely on management.

The Only Correct Method

Cattails must be removed every two years. Entire rootballs and rhizomes must be extracted. Removal must occur while plants are healthy and actively growing, and all biomass must be physically exported off-site.

Never cut. Never mulch. Never leave roots. Never allow landscapers to "maintain" bog plants.

Anything else is cosmetic work that feeds the exact organisms you are trying to control.

The Uncomfortable Truth

Bogs do not fail. Plants do not fail. People fail to manage them correctly.

Cattails do not clean water by existing. They clean water only when paired with intentional harvesting. Most lakes fail because plants are left to rot, root systems are ignored, nutrients are recycled instead of removed, and bogs are treated as decoration.

Do it right, and bogs become the strongest ally your lake will ever have. Do it wrong — or let the wrong hands touch them — and they become a quiet, expensive liability that feeds algae, Lyngbya and muck from the bottom up.

That is the reality of lake management. ☞



About the Author

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





Momentum Builds Early for Hardscape North America 2026

Hardscape North America (HNA) is already seeing strong early interest for its 2026 show, with registration opening sooner than ever and attendees signing up at a steady pace. Following record-breaking attendance in 2025, contractors, dealers, and designers are quickly making plans to return to Louisville this October to reconnect, learn, and explore new products.

“HNA is THE event every year that I make time for,” said Michael Pletz of How to Hardscape, noting the value of networking, new products, and industry connections.

Exhibit space is filling fast as companies commit to showcasing tools, technology, and business solutions. The HNA Installer Championship will also return in the

Hardscape House, bringing top crews together for a hands-on competition, with 12 team spots available and prizes for the top four teams.

Education remains a major draw, with classroom sessions, roundtables, certification courses, and live demonstrations to be announced soon, offering practical insights for both new and experienced professionals.

Registration is \$25 through May 31, 2026, and \$120 onsite, with one badge granting access to both HNA and Equip Exposition and more than 1,000 exhibits. HNA 2026 will take place October 21–23 at the Kentucky Exposition Center.

Hardscape North America is produced by the Concrete Masonry & Hardscapes Association and is co-located with Equip Exposition, providing education, exhibits, and networking for contractors, installers, and industry professionals.



Where Water Gardeners Gather: IWGS Comes to St. Louis August 18–21



Each year the International Waterlily and Water Gardening Society Symposium brings people together around a shared love of water gardens. It's a place to exchange ideas, learn from one another and spend time immersed in the plants, ponds and landscapes that connect us.

This summer, IWGS will bring its annual event to

St. Louis, Missouri. Taking place August 18–21, the Symposium welcomes water gardeners from around the world for several days of learning, conversation and discovery.

St. Louis provides a fitting backdrop for the 2026 gathering, inviting attendees to explore the region's horticultural offerings, including a dedicated day at the Missouri Botanical Garden, a destination recognized internationally for its plant collections, research and history.

In summer, the Garden's reflecting pools become a focal point as annual and perennial water lilies come into full bloom. Giant Victoria water lilies, some with leaves spanning up to six

feet, share the pools with dozens of Nymphaea cultivars grown and maintained using methods developed at the Garden over generations.

Speaking of giant Victoria water lilies, peak season also brings one of the water gardening world's most widely shared moments: the Waterlily Weigh-Off. Led by Denver Botanic Gardens and joined by participating gardens including the Missouri Botanical Garden — which took top honors in the event's first year — the weigh-off enters its third season this summer, placing attendees at the Garden during an exciting time for these remarkable plants.

The Symposium will also feature educational presentations led by respected voices in and around the aquatic plant world and time to connect with IWGS members, professional growers and hobbyists who share a passion for water gardening.

Those who have attended past events know the value of the event extends beyond scheduled sessions. Conversations over meals, shared observations in gardens and time spent with fellow attendees are frequently just as inspiring as formal programming.

Registration details and additional information will be announced in the coming months. For now, mark your calendar and plan to join IWGS in St. Louis in August 2026, where water gardeners gather to learn, share and grow together.

Learn more at iwgs.org.



Fitz's Fish Ponds Earns 2nd Runner-Up at the Prestigious ICF Builder Awards

Fitz's Fish Ponds is proud to announce that its Building Beauty koi ponds project has been honored with the 2nd Runner-Up award in the Specialty Applications category at the 21st Annual ICF Builder Awards, presented at the World of Concrete trade show in Las Vegas on January 21, 2026.

The award — widely recognized within the insulated concrete form (ICF) industry for celebrating excellence, innovation, and

craftsmanship in projects utilizing ICF technology — highlights Fitz's Fish Ponds' commitment to pushing the boundaries of pond design and construction.

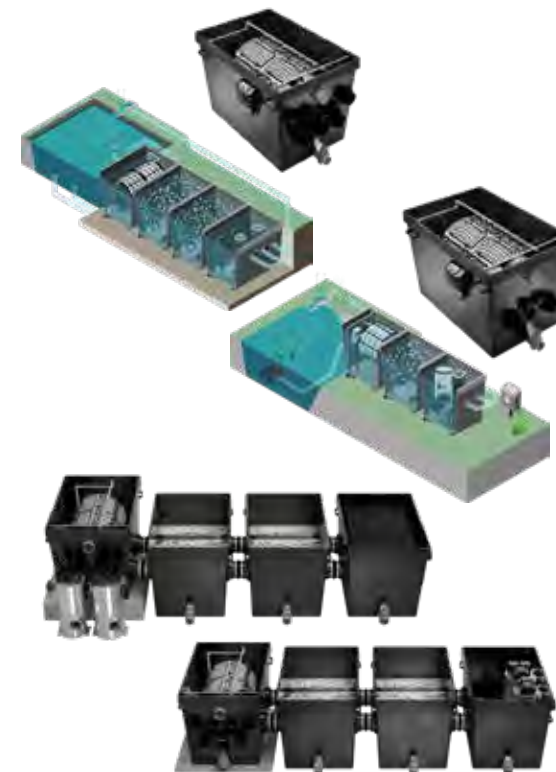
Three members of the Fitz's Fish Ponds team attended World of Concrete in Las Vegas to accept the award in person and represent the company at this national stage. The honor marks a significant milestone in the company's continued mission to elevate pond construction standards and showcase creative, high-quality applications of ICF BuildBlock systems.

The Building Beauty project features nine custom koi ponds which were thoughtfully designed and constructed with BuildBlock insulated concrete forms and completed in challenging winter conditions in Saddle River, New Jersey. All pond systems and plumbing were concealed within the ICF walls, and the finished result blends both functional engineering and artistic craftsmanship.

“We're extremely proud to receive this national recognition,” said Tom Swinarsky, Manager of FFP Saddle River. “Reviving Waterford Gardens and transforming it into a thriving destination for koi and aquatic environments has been a labor of love. To be honored for our use of BuildBlock ICF in this project is both humbling and inspiring, and it underscores our dedication to excellence in everything we build.”

Since acquiring and revitalizing the historic Waterford Gardens property — a landmark water gardening site now home to one of Fitz's Fish Ponds' flagship retail locations — the company has continued to blend historical preservation with modern design, engineering, and sustainable construction practices.

See more about the winners and learn more about the awards by visiting: <https://icfmag.com/builder-award-winners/>



NEW! Atlantic-Oase ProfiClear Premium XL Multi-Module Systems

ProfiClear Premium XL Multi-Module Systems deliver scalable, professional-grade filtration designed for large koi ponds, swim ponds, and demanding water garden applications. Choose between Pump-fed or Gravity-fed configurations, allowing the system to adapt to site conditions and build requirements. Pump-fed filters install above water level, taking dirty water from a pump in the bottom of the pond and returning filtered water by gravity back into pond. Gravity-fed filters install below pond level, taking in dirty water at one end as clean, filtered water is pumped back to the pond from a pump housed in the discharge side.

Featuring a self-cleaning rotating drum pre-filter with 60-micron screens, incoming pond water passes through, automatically removing debris and

flushing waste via high-pressure cleaning controlled by sensor, timer, or manual operation. Choose from two bio-media modules for biological filtration; Standing Bed and Moving Bed Modules. Moving Bed Modules feature enlarged moving beds with 60 liters of PondPads that can digest up to 45.5 ounces of fish waste a day. Standing Bed Modules features curved, dense ClearWave blocks to create the largest possible surface area for ideal colonization of beneficial bacteria. Operate and monitor your ProfiClear XL systems with ease remotely with the addition of the Oase Control app and Oase Control System.

Learn more about the ProfiClear XL line here: <https://www.atlantic-oase.com/products/categories/water-garden/proficlear-premium>

Eric Triplett Rebrands Long-Running Podcast as The Deep End, Marking a New Era of Leadership and Personal Development for the Trades

On January 1, 2026, industry veteran, entrepreneur, and media personality Eric Triplett officially retired The Pond Digger Podcast after seven years and launched its successor, The Deep End—a reimagined program focused on personal development, leadership, and long-term capability for tradesmen, business owners, and high-performing professionals.

After hundreds of episodes centered on industry tactics, Triplett says the evolution reflects both his own growth and the deeper needs of his audience. Drawing on more than 40 years of experience in construction, aquatics, and business, The Deep End shifts away from surface-level strategies and into conversations about responsibility, discipline, and what it truly takes to build a meaningful career.

“People keep asking why I renamed the podcast The Deep End,” Triplett said. “And the truth is—it’s layered.”

While the name carries an aquatic undertone familiar to longtime listeners, Triplett explains that its deeper meaning comes from skate culture and the idea of full commitment. Dropping into the deep end is a moment where hesitation disappears—and growth begins.

“Once you’re in, you’re in,” he said. “No toe testing. No lifeguard. No exit ladder halfway down.”

With this rebrand, the podcast moves away from hype-driven narratives and into what Triplett describes as the foundational values of depth, discipline, and diligence. The show explores what happens when leaders stop hedging, stop waiting for certainty, and take full ownership of their outcomes.

“The shallow end feels safe. The deep end feels risky,” Triplett said. “But most people don’t fail because

they went too far. They fail because they never went far enough.”

The Deep End serves professionals across the trades by addressing the real pressures behind success—decision-making, standards, consistency, and personal accountability. Episodes feature honest conversations about what it takes to build resilience, lead with intention, and sustain excellence over time.

“It’s choosing commitment over comfort,” Triplett said. “Execution over theory. Action over endless preparation.”

Triplett believes the “deep end” is where true capability is built—a place where excuses fade and growth is earned. The new show stands as both a mindset and an invitation, challenging listeners to stop standing on the edge and step fully into their potential.

The Deep End is now streaming on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, with weekly Deep End livestreams launching to expand the conversation even further.

“If you’ve been standing on the edge for a while,” Triplett added, “you already know what it’s time to do. Welcome to the Deep End.”



Art of the Yard Founder Shane Hemphill Inducted Into Shinkokai USA, Marking Industry First

Art of the Yard has reached a historic milestone with the official induction of its founder, Shane Hemphill, into Shinkokai USA, the world’s leading organization dedicated to the advancement and preservation of Nishikigoi.

Hemphill’s acceptance marks a significant first as the first strictly installation-focused contractor ever admitted into Shinkokai. Shinkokai is internationally recognized for preserving traditional Japanese breeding practices, protecting bloodlines, and setting the global benchmark for koi excellence. Membership is not applied for—it is earned. Members are selected based on exceptional knowledge, integrity, and lifelong commitment to Nishikigoi.

“This honor represents decades of dedication, learning, and respect for koi,” said Hemphill. “Acceptance into Shinkokai means being entrusted with upholding the highest standards in our industry.”

Hemphill’s koi journey began in 1994 with the Rocky Mountain Koi Club, where he has served in multiple board positions and remains actively involved. He has spent years studying in Japan alongside top breeders, learning how to evaluate skin quality, body structure, pattern balance, and long-term potential.

“To truly understand koi, you must go to the source,” Hemphill said. “Every koi is chosen with intention.”

Last year, Hemphill also competed at the All-American Koi Show, the largest koi show in North America, earning multiple major awards—an achievement he attributes to knowledge, discipline, and experience.

That same expertise shapes how Art of the Yard designs its systems. While many water features prioritize aesthetics, the company specializes in true koi ponds engineered for longevity, clarity, and long-term fish health. Each project incorporates proper waste removal, advanced filtration, and hydrodynamic design.

“Our ponds aren’t just beautiful,” Hemphill explained. “They’re life-support systems for living art.”

Hemphill’s induction represents more than personal recognition—it underscores the importance of proper pond engineering as the foundation of successful koi keeping. Congratulations to Shane Hemphill on this achievement.

New Ohio Koi Greenhouse Positions Sunbury as a Midwest Hub for Fish and Water Gardens

To meet growing demand for ornamental fish and water garden features across Central Ohio, Ohio Koi is constructing a 13,000-square-foot retail greenhouse that will open to the public in spring 2026.

The new facility, known as Mega-1, represents a major investment in the local economy and is expected to bring increased tourism and national attention to Delaware County. Once complete, the center will serve koi, goldfish, and water-garden enthusiasts from across the United States.

Over the past decade, Ohio Koi has become the Midwest’s leading breeder and importer of koi and goldfish, with record growth in 2025. Mega-1 will house thousands of koi and exotic goldfish valued in the millions.

The greenhouse will feature 34 in-ground tanks and ponds, ranging from 500 to 20,000 gallons, designed to accommodate large



shipments of premium Japanese koi arriving in early 2026. Dozens of goldfish tanks will showcase 15 to 20 varieties bred on-site and sourced from premier breeders in Japan and across Asia.

Fish will be available in a wide range of sizes and price points, serving home pond owners, collectors, and commercial landscape projects.

Mega-1 will also include the Koi Lounge, a tranquil space where guests can view showcase koi while consulting with Ohio Koi’s pond design and construction specialists. Visitors

will be able to explore material samples, view a portfolio of completed pond projects, and receive guidance on equipment, stonework, and aquatic plant selections.

About Ohio Koi

Founded by Todd Elliott, Ohio Koi began in 2008 as a backyard water-garden hobby and officially launched as a business in 2016. The Sunbury-based operation has since expanded into a leading koi and goldfish breeding and retail center with multiple greenhouses and ponds. Learn more at www.ohiokoi.com



Dedicated Koi Pond Build to be Held Prior to All American Koi Show: Hosted by The Deep End

The Deep End is a hands-on koi pond build workshop running Tuesday through Thursday, leading directly into the All-American Koi Show weekend. This immersive koi pond construction experience is designed for hobbyists, builders, and koi enthusiasts who want real-world pond-building knowledge and meaningful industry connections. Participants will work together to build a functional koi pond from the ground up, assisting in every stage of the process while learning proper koi pond design, filtration concepts, and build flow.

Beyond the build, The Deep End is a networking-

driven experience, bringing together like-minded koi keepers, pond builders, and enthusiasts in a collaborative environment where relationships are formed through teamwork. This isn’t a lecture or demonstration — it’s an interactive koi pond workshop where learning, building, and networking happen side by side.

By the time the All-American Koi Show begins, attendees leave with hands-on experience, new connections, and momentum heading into the show weekend. Spots are limited — sign up and step into The Deep End.

Use this link to register to be a part of the All American Koi Build <https://allamericankoisshow.com/aaks-2026-master-class-registration-2/>





Fitz's Fish Ponds Announces Inaugural Plant Fest 2026 at Historic Saddle River Property

Fitz's Fish Ponds (FFP) has officially announced the launch of Plant Fest 2026, the company's first annual plant-focused event, set to take place May 2-3, 2026, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at FFP Saddle River—formerly known as Waterford Gardens.

The new event honors the rich horticultural legacy of the property, which dates back to the late 1800s when the Tricker family operated greenhouses and nurseries on the site. The Trickers were recognized for cultivating ornamental plants that supplied prominent estates throughout northern New Jersey and New York. That tradition continued for generations under Waterford Gardens, a destination long respected within the regional gardening community.

With Plant Fest 2026, Fitz's Fish Ponds aims to celebrate that history while introducing a modern, education-forward experience designed for pond professionals, aquatic plant specialists, garden centers, landscape contractors and serious hobbyists.

While Fitz's Fish Ponds is nationally recognized as one of the largest importers of Japanese koi in the United States, company leadership says the event reflects a broader commitment to aquatic plants and integrated water garden ecosystems.

"Yes, there will absolutely still be koi," organizers noted with a smile. "But this weekend is about honoring the plant heritage of this property and elevating the role aquatic and ornamental plants play in today's pond and garden builds."

Plant Fest 2026 will feature two dedicated educational talks. Kelly Billing of Water Becomes a Garden will provide an inspiring look at how aquatic plants can transform any water holding vessel into a garden, exploring thoughtful plant selection, proper placement, and seasonal care techniques that promote healthy growth and visual balance.

Additionally, Jennifer Bujalski of Fitz's Fish Ponds Aquariums & Aquascaping will present on planting an aquascape "smarter not harder".

Registration Information: Industry professionals, hobbyists and members of the public may register online.

To attend, please register at <https://fitzfishponds.odoo.com/event/plant-fest-2026-2/page/home-plant-fest>

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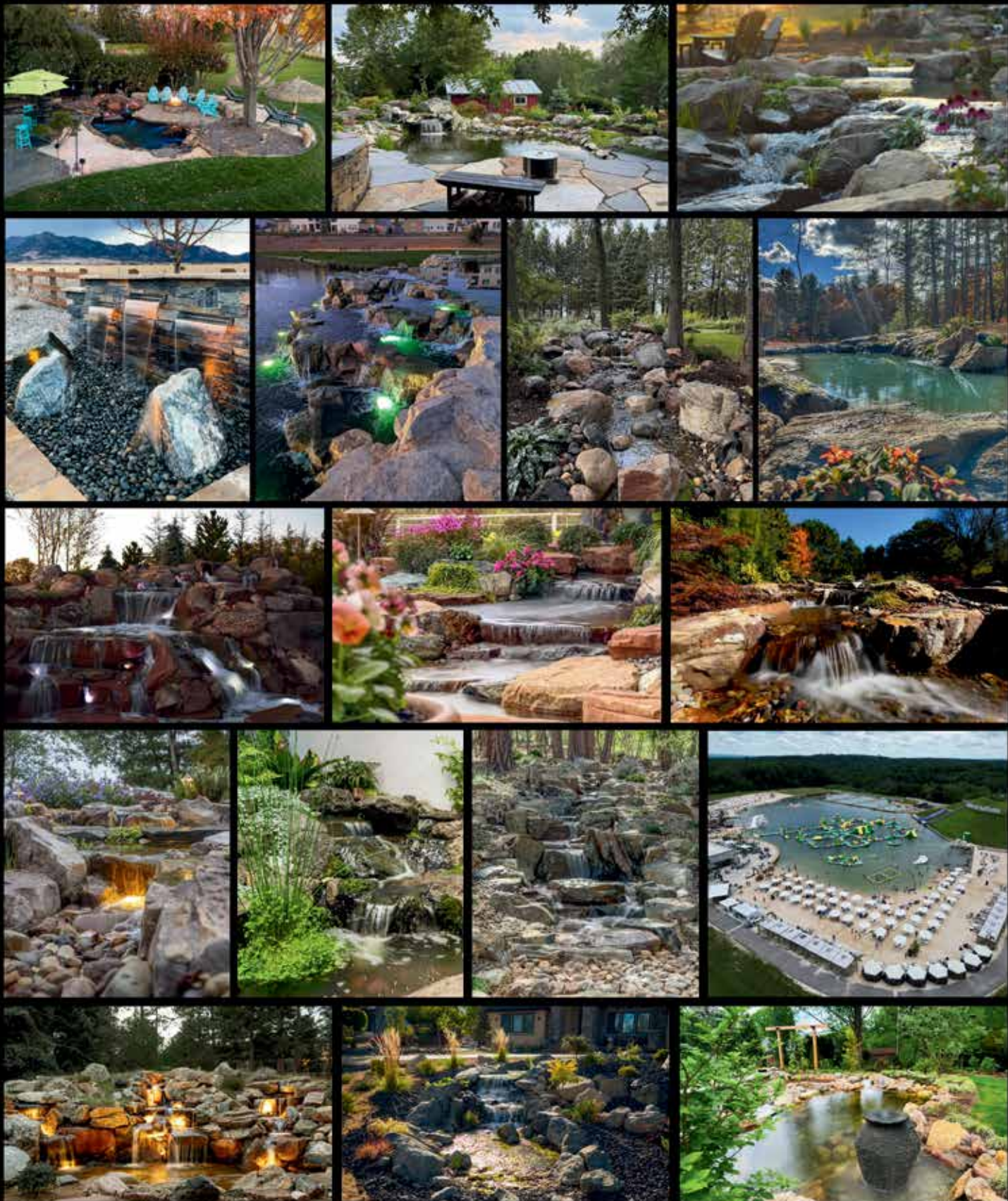
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FINAL THOUGHT...



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Contributing Visionaries

Pictured above are all 2nd Runner-Up winners and entries that received at least one vote. To everyone who participated, we thank you! Your creativity, dedication, and passion are deeply valued, and each of you played an important role in making this year truly special.

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