

BACKYARD PONDS

by Konrad Schmidt

St. Paul, Minn.

I have always been fascinated by the amount of life that strives in and around a pond, such as blooming wildflowers, singing birds, croaking frogs, and of course fish. Unfortunately, I have always had to visit a park or travel into the country to find a pond because I lived in a city. The thought of building my own pond in the backyard never crossed my mind until I met NANFA member Don Richmond, who worked at the same pet store where I worked, called "Finny Critters."

Don had already been in the hobby for several years and had pursued a side interest of keeping a pond during the summers. This seemed like a very interesting idea and I wanted to learn more. I badgered Don into giving me a tour. I was surprised to find out how simply he had made his pond and still managed to get very impressive results. The pond had a maximum width of about five feet and had a very irregular shape that created many bays. The bottom was lined with a sheet of plastic and contoured to produce shallow bars and slightly deeper basins. The basins were filled with a couple of inches of gravel to anchor aquatic plants. At one end there was a cascading waterfall operated by an old-parts washer pump that Don had found at a junkyard.

Don had originally stocked his pond with tropical fish, but later added several native species. The most visible fishes were the livebearers and some killifish that were always active and remained within a few inches of the surface; however, several other fishes would make brief appearances at feeding time. Don's primary interest was fish, but he spent a great deal of time on other aspects to make the pond look as natural as possible. He collected several species of aquatic plants to aquascape the inside of the pond. These plants had no problem adapting to this artificial environment, and really flourished by mid-summer. He also landscaped the pond's outer edge with bog plants that really added a convincing touch. He tried releasing frogs in the pond, but most became disenchanted and hopped away. He did find one species, called the Green Frog, that did stay. It had a very unusual croak that I will never forget. Don received an extra bonus from his pond that he'd never expected: several species of songbirds that he had never noticed in his yard before were attracted to the pond and visited it frequently.

After seeing Don's success with his pond, I decided to give it a try myself, and finally got around to it last summer. I used many of Don's ideas and made up a few of my own that resulted in an even simpler pond. I bought a small, circular wading pool and sunk it into the ground. I used a large airstone and Silent Giant pump to provide circulation that with a little imagination resembled a natural upwelling spring. I bordered

the pool with boulders and seeded the surrounding area with garden flowers. I remember how barren and unnatural it looked in those first few days, but in about a month the flowers were beginning to blossom and lean out over the water, hiding the pool's edge and giving it a more natural shape. I primarily used the pond as an overflow tank, because I sometimes collect more fish than I have room for in my aquariums. I also exiled some problem fish such as Texas Cichlids to spend the summer outside. I threw many fishes into the pond over the summer, but the Banded Killifish and minnows tended to be the most visible. Some species, such as Johnny Darters and Tadpole Madtoms were not seen again until I drained the pond in October.

Don and I both derived a great deal of enjoyment from our ponds that really cannot be conveyed in words. I strongly encourage anyone that has a spare corner in their yard to give the idea some consideration. I can also recommend a free pamphlet entitled A Pool for the Backyard that provides information on a variety of designs to enable the individual to select one that will best suit his needs. The pamphlet is available from the following address:

National Wildlife Federation  
1412 16th St., NW  
Washington, DC 20036.

#### Update

Don has gotten lazy. He bought a livestock watering trough (90 gal.), painted it with epoxy paint, and placed it up on blocks, which makes it easier to drain in the fall. It's not that pretty, but maintenance has been greatly reduced.

###

---