

## Answers to gardening questions

# A water garden

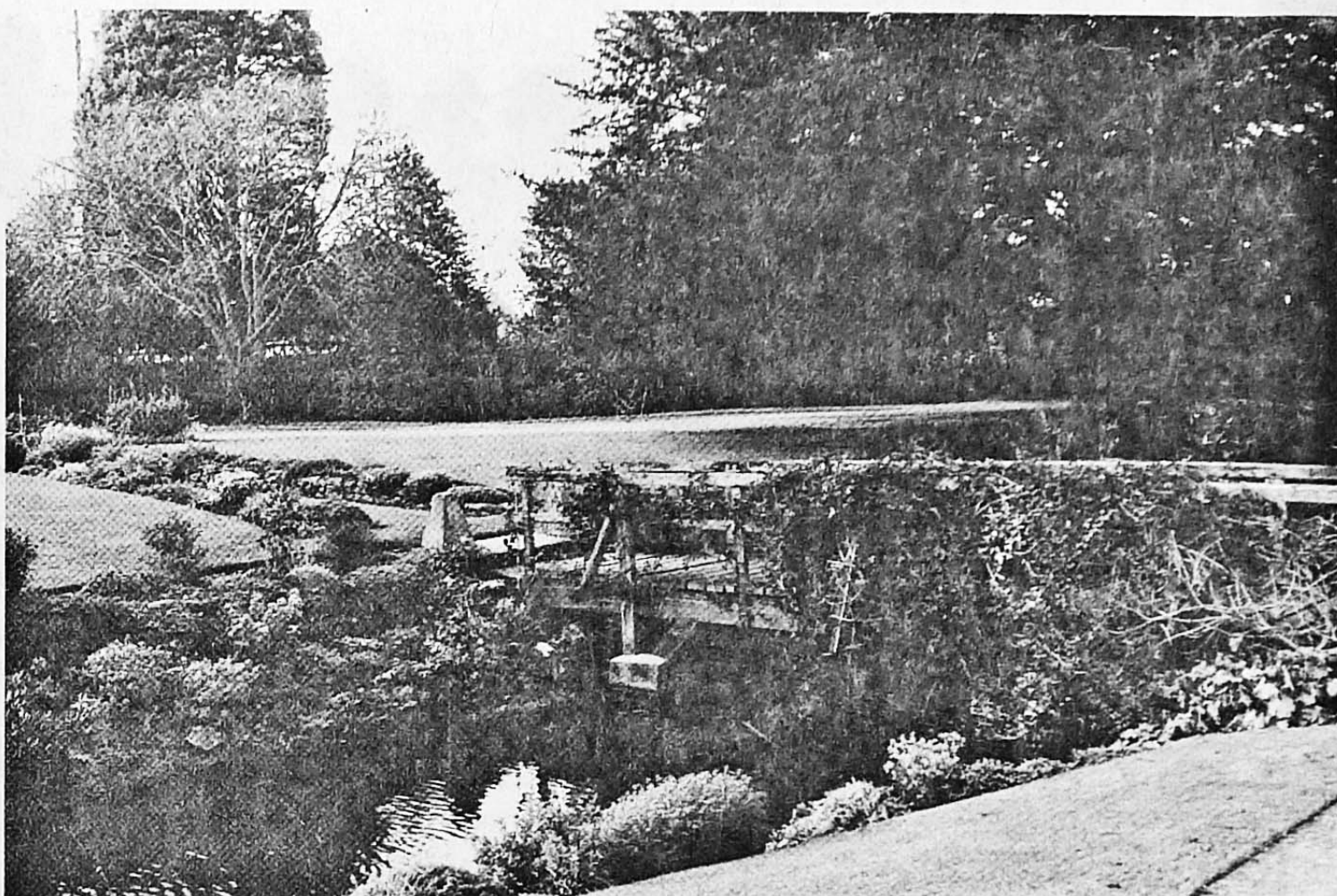
By R. W. Sidwell

Water alters the character of a garden. It opens up a new dimension. And I do not mean that it enables you to grow water lilies, although this may be a very good reason for having a pond. It is the widening of the environmental range that is so important. Fishes, frogs and dragon flies can now live with you and, who knows, you might have a heron visiting you and stealing your golden orfes. I can remember, in the 1930s, when kingfishers were a garden pest in Edgbaston. Would they were today.

To start a water garden one must have water and, still, more important, somewhere to put it. A natural stream provides the best water garden of all, provided the water flow is not subject to very great fluctuations. It is annoying if one's plastic gnomes finish up six gardens downstream.

In the absence of natural water, pools with some sort of waterproof lining can be constructed. On heavy clay soils it may be possible to produce a natural puddled clay lining but this is usually unreliable and something more certain is called for. In time gone by, pools were almost invariably cement-lined. If well done, this is still the best method. Butyl rubber sheeting is now the commonest form of lining. For very small pools, one can have pre-moulded fibre glass but small shallow pools are of limited use and not easy to manage.

The lining material should not be



obvious. A bright blue pool may look good with a bikini-clad blonde splashing around but for non-human occupation the less obviously artificial the pool is the better.

Fountains and waterfalls can be operated with simple circulating pumps which can be switched on just before important visitors arrive. If you are doing it on the grand scale, you may have a boy with a dolphin from which the water spouts. It is all a matter of taste.

Now for the plants. This is what we are really making the pool for. Do not use plants that are too vigorous for the size of the pool. The more vigorous water lilies require something

approaching a lake to accommodate them. Smaller kinds are available. Buy from a specialist firm and peruse the catalogue before ordering. When waterlily leaves have to grow upright because there is no room for them to float, flowering is greatly reduced. Water lilies are not the only floating aquatics. The sweet scented water hawthorn (*Aponogeton distachyus*) is an attractive floater for medium and larger ponds. It soon gets a yard across in water 12in to 18in deep. The so-called fringed water lily (*Nymphaea peltata*) a rare native, is suitable for the smaller ponds.

I find the marginal plants more interesting than the floaters. There is every gradation from dry land to two feet of water into which these upright growers can be fitted. Once again, avoid the most vigorous plants in small ponds. The native reed mace (*Typha latifolia*) and the rarer but also native *Ranunculus lingua* can soon become a nuisance where space is limited. *Iris laevis* is suitable for shallow water and will also grow in moist soil near the bank. It is less invasive than the yellow flag iris. *Pontederia cordata*, with blue spikes of flowers, *Sagittaria sagittifolia* with arrowhead leaves and beautiful white flowers, and the little white arum (*Calla palustris*) all love to wallow around in mud, as does the double marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*).

The mention of mud reminds me that many artificial ponds do not have proper moist margins. The

natural pond has banks from which plant roots may reach water. With artificial ponds, once outside the pond shell, the ground is as dry as that of the ordinary garden. This can be overcome to some extent by constructing stepped margins to support soil.

Where moist margins are available, the door is wide open for some of the grandest of herbaceous perennials. The ligularias, Asiatic relatives of the groundsel though they are, are superb plants where space permits; and requiring even more space is *Gunnera manicata* from Brazil, but remember that single leaves of this plant can get over three feet across. Rodgersias, filipendulas and astilbes are at their best when their roots can get into water. Astilbes can look so pathetic in a summer drought. It is not until one sees them under really moist conditions that one realises just how good they are. To many people, the Asiatic primulas are at the top of the list of moisture-lovers. *Primula rosea* is in flower in March and has the purest pink flowers imaginable — the finest of all primulas I think. The candelabras start with *P. japonica* in May and continue with *P. pulverulenta* and many others right into Midsummer. *P. chungensis* has orange yellow flowers and *P. burmanica* purplish pink. Where the two grow together, brilliant coral scarlets and salmons are produced, presumably through crossing. These primulas are as promiscuous as cats.

## A countrywoman's life

# Willow pattern bathroom