

WATER BEDS

Heinjo Lahring admits that Sundre is one of the worst places in Canada to build a water garden.

He did it anyway.

Story by Donna Balzer

Photographs by George Webber

Mothers beware! Asking your children to provide you with a plant—a rare and hard to find plant—may send them off on a lifelong journey.

The journey for Heinjo Lahring began when he was in grade school. His mother and father built a water garden in their Calgary backyard, but at that time—in the sixties—it was hard to find water plants—especially the water lilies his mother desired.

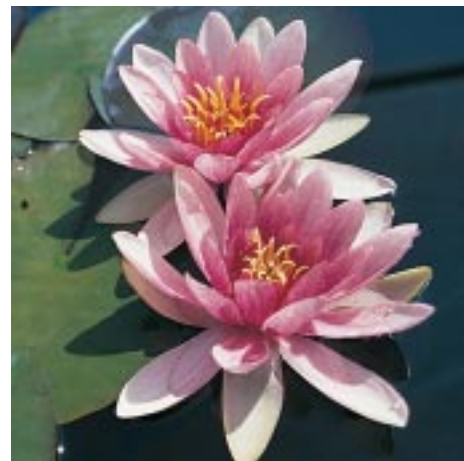
As a child, Heinjo and his father searched Alberta's wild ponds for plants after their efforts to purchase water lilies failed.

Later, as a university student, "Heinjo spent more time in his canoe than in the classroom," claims his wife Jan, who remembers "a professor talking about a fantastic paper on water lilies—it was written by Heinjo."

As a graduate, Heinjo continued to pursue his interest in water and the plants it supports, when he rode his bicycle from Alberta to southern California to visit the reported "best supplier of water plants" in North America. He arrived and found a disheveled and run-down business with water lilies in bathtubs and a crumbling, near-defunct operation. Instead of being deterred, he was motivated to create and build a water lily growing facility of his own.

LEFT: Canna lilies including 'Americana' (red) and 'Pretoria' (green and yellow) are grown as annuals in the water garden.





TOP: Floating plants, such as Water lettuce and Duckweed, are scooped out of holding tanks and sold in plastic bags. BOTTOM LEFT: Heinjo and Jan Lahring in their newly completed home. BOTTOM RIGHT: These hardy water lilies sit directly on the water instead of perched on long stems like tropical varieties. OPPOSITE: Pine forest provides an improbable backdrop for the garden.

It seems improbable that a family would attempt to breed and grow water lilies—seemingly fragile plants to the inexperienced grower—in a climate so harsh even the trees seem to get smaller in the nursery during an average growing season. At an almost 4,000-foot elevation, this 80-acre, zone 2 wedge of land in Alberta’s foothills between Sundre and Bearberry Hamlet has 90 frost-free days, browsing moose and muskrat, and a climate most suited to wild, not water lilies. “It’s challenging to garden in Sundre,” remarked Jan, “Everyone knows that. It’s generally a short, moist, cool summer with cold nights and frequent hailstorms.”

Cold or not, the garden is an integral part of the Bearberry Creek Greenhouse and Nursery. It consists of

three main areas: the growing area for marginal and deep-water pond plants; the sales area of log, tub and stone ponds; and the display area with a stream and liner pond as well as man-made earth ponds which are visible between the gate and greenhouse. An amazing array of plants is displayed in the Lahrings’ garden, reminding the viewer that water gardening is possible anywhere, even in the shadow of the Rockies. “It’s probably one of the worst places in Canada to do this commercially,” says Heinjo. “In our worst year we only had 30 frost-free days, but we do feel that plants produced here will be tough enough to grow anywhere.”

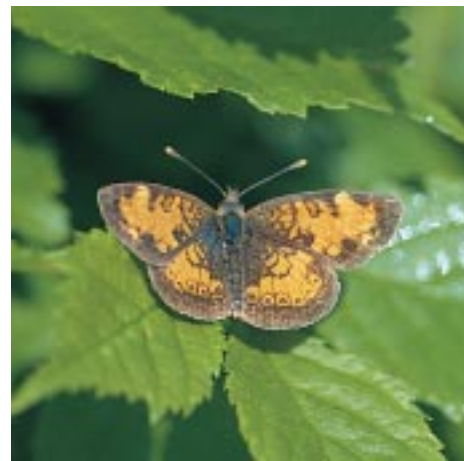
The Lahrings blend wild plants (natives) and introduced hardy plants in their garden to great effect. Water

lilies of many kinds grace the centre of the ponds. Annuals of the non-geranium kind—such as water canna (*Canna americanallis* cvs., *C. flaccida* cvs. and *C. x glauca* hybrids) surprised even this gardener because they just seem so exotic in this—um—bush setting. Little known but very interesting additions of edge plants—or emergents as they are also known—line the edges of the stream and earth ponds. Along the stream edge, easily recognized yellow water iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) are used with the Eastern Canadian native Kermesina water iris (*Iris versicolor* var. *Kermesina*), the blue water iris (*Iris laevigata*) and the texturally effective variegated water iris (*Iris pseudacorus* var. *variegata*).

For too many years wetlands have been drained or

filled for other uses. This makes the Lahrings enthusiastic about water gardening in Alberta, from backyard pools with koi to backyard bogs and wetland simulations. When asked about the potential for attracting insects of the biting kind to these backyard gardens with bog and swamp features, Heinjo admitted: “People are skittish about bugs—it isn’t for everybody, I guess.” Slough grass (*Beckmannia syzigachne*), duck potato or arrowhead (*Sagittaria cuneata*) and pickerel weed (*Pontedaria cordata*) are the strange names of plants unfamiliar to most gardeners, but seen thriving in this Sundre site.

So, is this small farm a garden or a science experiment? How long will geraniums pay the bills before reclamation plants and water lilies take over?



TOP: Bearberry produces plants in large sunken frames fenced off from foraging moose and deer. BOTTOM LEFT: A bounty of potted flowers beautify the outdoor facilities while free-range chickens search for grain and grit. BOTTOM RIGHT: Butterflies are nurtured by plentiful water, varied plants and surrounding forests. OPPOSITE: Scouring rush is more typically grown as a reclamation or wetland plant than an ornamental. Its elegant, branchless growth emerges directly from the side of the pond.

“We don’t know if it will ever support our family but we feel it’s the right thing to do right now,” say Jan and Heinjo, whose children enjoy their foothills setting, riding their horses to the school bus stop each morning and occasionally indulging in a little farm play—sometimes right in the lily pond.

“It’s our life—everything revolves around it,” concludes Heinjo, who admits their 20-year-old garden and farm is a work in progress and things are always changing. “Its not just lilies—we work with all kinds of water plants. We’re growers—it’s a water plant farm—we’re building a new log hail shelter to display our water lilies...” says Heinjo who is still upbeat on water lilies after all these years. “There is a surprising amount of variation within this

group—lots of possibilities as far as flower size, leaf size, colour and shape. Many of the water lilies currently available have heat-loving ancestors that make them more difficult to grow here. Less use has been made of wild types of water lilies native to colder climates.”

Heinjo has recently been researching a new field guide for wetland plants of the prairie provinces and was contemplating this summer’s field research when we spoke this spring. “We’ve been talking about heading out to southern Alberta—or possibly the Eastern slopes,” he tells me. “People have a tendency to bring plants in from warmer climates but we focus on plants from cold areas. Subarctic plants such as cottongrass have a lot of potential here.”

The plants selected and grown at Bearberry Creek Water Gardens reflect two new trends in Alberta gardening: the trend towards using plants in ponds in the hobbyist’s backyard, and the growing use of native water plants for reclamation and wetland enhancement in the suburbs.

Is Heinjo’s mother still gardening? The answer is a clear yes. In their neighboring homesite Heinjo’s parents, Henry and Isolde, are keeping up the gardening tradition and have designed a backyard pond for themselves. This location, even with its harsh climate, has a clear advantage for Isolde, who will never again face a shortage of water plants. Every plant she will ever desire is available—or soon will be—directly from her son just a few steps outside her front door.

10 WATER PLANTS HARDY TO THE PRAIRIES

Arrowhead	<i>Sagittaria cuneata</i>
Yellow water crowfoot	<i>Ranunculus gmelinii</i>
Aurora	<i>Nymphaea ‘Aurora’</i>
Pink Gonnere	<i>Nymphaea ‘Madame Wilfron Gonnere’</i>
Spatterdock	<i>Nuphar variegatum</i>
Hornwort	<i>Ceratophyllum demersum</i>
Yellow flag	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>
Japanese iris	<i>Iris kaempferi</i>
Water smartweed	<i>Polygonum amphibium</i>
Pencil cattail	<i>Typha augustifolia</i>

Donna Balzer, a Calgary-based horticulturist, broadcaster and writer, used to think she gardened in Alberta’s most challenging zone.