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Opening Your Pond In The Spring

By Shannon Goins

Springtime is when we all emerge from the comfort our warm houses to our gardens to see everything coming to life once again. The long dark days of winter are gone and there is plenty of daylight to get all of that spring cleaning taken care of. For many of us, there is a pond that beckons to us.

During fall and winter it is typical for a pond to accumulate extra debris from dead leaves and grass that blow in from the surrounding yard. To get the pond ready for spring, it is necessary to remove much of that debris and clean out the excess residue in the filter as well as prepare the plants and begin feeding any fish that might be present. By carefully following the procedures outlined in this article, you will be on your way to having a healthy pond to enjoy this season.

DEBRIS REMOVAL AND FILTER CLEANING

Let's begin with the most obvious challenge: too much debris has collected in the pond during the winter and it needs to be removed. Our first instinct is to remove everything, wash it until it is sparkling clean, put it all back in, fill the pond up and be done. While improving the appearance of the pond is the goal, excessive cleaning can sometimes do more harm than good. Remember that the goal is to get most of the residue out, not to spit-polish each rock.

The general process for cleaning a pond in the spring begins with skimming and picking out sticks and leaves. There are net handles with special attachments to make this process easier. Next, open your filter and remove the filter media. Submerge the media in a separate tub full of pond water. Do not use tap water for this purpose as it will kill the good bacteria living in your filter. Also, never use



A pond vacuum is ideal for the removal of leaves and other waste from the bottom of a pond.

any soap or household cleaners in or around your pond as they are harmful and can hang around. Elbow grease and pressurized water will do the trick.

Drain the pond water to a low level so that catching fish is easier. Carefully remove the fish to a large vat with circulating water, preferably in a shaded area to keep the water cool. Make sure that you have a large air stone that is being fed from an air pump to keep the water oxygenated. As the day progresses, the water will heat up and the warmer the water, the less oxygen it can hold for the fish.

Once the fish are out, drain the pond completely and vacuum it with a pond vacuum. You may also choose to pressure wash the bottom of the pond to loosen debris. This is particularly helpful if you have stones or gravel on the bottom of your pond. Don't worry if you can't get all of the sludge out. You will be adding a sludge removing bacteria later to add out what you could not.

As you are refilling the pond, return your attention to your filter material. Using the water in which you have been storing it, rinse the media as best as you can to loosen any unwanted debris. Filter mats can be knocked together to loosen stubborn waste materials. Do not worry if your filter still looks dirty. You are simply trying to get large chunks of waste out of it. The most important thing here is to preserve your good bacteria by not over cleaning.

When a pond is deep cleaned, most of the good bacteria that are needed to keep the pond healthy are killed off. While it is important to remove the nasty black sludge that produces toxic gasses as it warms up and begins to bio-degrade, it is just as important to preserve existing good bacteria in the filter and replenish the good bacteria that have been destroyed while cleaning the pond. These bacterial additives are readily available at your local pond store.

As the pond is filling, be sure to add plenty of dechlorinator to the water to remove the chlorine. Replace the filter pads and other media and turn on the pump. Add spring/summer start-up bacteria along with a sludge removing bacteria that will finish up the cleanup job for you.

After about four weeks, it is safe to do a deep clean on your filter. The good bacteria living on the surfaces in the pond, such as rocks and plants, will have re-established themselves enough that they should be able to compensate for the temporary loss of the bacteria in the filter. Be sure to dose again with a bacterial additive after deep cleaning your filter. Also, don't rush to stock the pond immediately after it has been cleaned. Give it a few weeks to allow the pond to settle.

If you have a UV filter, it is a good idea to replace the bulb in the spring. Most bulbs last about 6 months, which is a single season. Some bulbs are made to last longer. If you are unsure about your bulb, contact your local pond supply store for assistance. Also pay attention to the quality of your filter material. If it is getting worn down, replace it with new material. Most pond stores will have material sold by the foot that you can cut to fit your particular filter.

WATER QUALITY TESTING

One of the most important things for a pond owner to do in the spring is to test the water. What tests need to be done and how often depends on the age of the pond. New ponds and those that have gone through a heavy cleaning process require daily testing to monitor levels of ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, and pH. Buffering capacity, also known as alkalinity, should be monitored weekly. Once the pond has become established, usually in 4-6 weeks, testing can be done every week to two weeks. If your test kit is older than a year, be sure to pick up a new one at your local pond retail store as they do go bad and can give false readings.

- Ideal Water Quality Parameters
- Ammonia – 0 ppm (parts per million)



Shannon Goins is a co-owner of NorthSide Aquatics, located on Counts Massie Rd. in Maumelle. She specializes in filtration and water quality management. Shannon welcomes everyone to stop in and see the new greenhouse water garden area at NorthSide Aquatics and join them on Facebook for the latest store updates.



A healthy planted pond with koi.

- Nitrites – 0 ppm
- Nitrate – less than 40 ppm
- pH – between 6.5 and 7.5
- Alkalinity – 100 ppm

One other important thing to measure is the salt content of the pond water, known as salinity. The measurement of salinity is called specific gravity and can be measured with a refractometer or a digital salinity tester. These can be found at any good pond store. For ponds without plants, a specific gravity of 1.000 is ideal. If a pond has plants 0.500 is the appropriate specific gravity.

Salt is very beneficial to the fish. It improves gill function, protects against nitrite toxicity, and reduces stress by helping to maintain a natural balance of electrolytes in the body fluids of pond fish. Additionally, it helps to keep parasites off of the fish. Keep in mind that you should only add salt after you remove water. Do not add extra salt when adding water for evaporation as the salt does not evaporate. For example, if you drain your pond completely, follow the directions on the box for the total volume of your pond. If you change half of the water during the season, add back half a dose.

FEEDING FISH

One of the most exciting things about spring is that you can begin to feed the fish again. It is important, though, to wait until the water is 50 degrees Fahrenheit to begin feeding. Fish will eat before the water warms up this far, but they are unable to digest the food properly at lower temperatures. The best way to determine when it is time to feed is with a feeding thermometer. Remember to always feed a high quality staple food. Many foods contain filler material that is of no nutritional value to the fish and produces more waste for your pond which can lead to more algae growth.

PLANT CARE

Spring is the time to care for the hardy plants that are re-emerging from the previous

year. When the water is in the 50 degree range, you may begin to fertilize. You may also find that some plants need to be divided if they are too crowded in their pots. If they are not thinned out, their continued growth will suffer and they may not flower as well.

When considering adding new plants for the season, be sure to make sure that the last frost is over before adding tropical varieties. As a general rule, you

should try to cover about 60% of the pond surface with floating plants and water lilies to keep the pond cool and to minimize algae growth.

ALGAE CONTROL

Controlling algae in the spring is best done before the algae appears. After your pond cleaning is done, add some peat pellets to darken the water. This will make it more difficult for light to pass into the pond and fuel the algae. It will also provide protection for fish from predators and shade.

Another effective method to control algae is by using barley. Barley comes in a

liquid extract, pellets, and in bales or planters. Use the extract beginning early in the season because you do not have to wait for it to decompose as you do with actual barley. The pellets, bales, and planters are good for longer-term use as they continue to naturally produce algae retardant as they bio-degrade. Barley pellets, bales, and planters require replacement about 2-3 times during a typical Arkansas pond season. Begin using barley when the water is at about 50 degrees F as it takes about 6 weeks to notice a reduction in the algae.



Barley straw planters are a unique way to display plants and control algae at the same time.

Should you experience any problems with preparing your pond for spring, help is always around the corner. Check with your local pond store and ask the professionals for assistance.



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