

# Lilypons Water Gardens is one of world's largest water lily suppliers

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LILYPONS, MD — The story unfolds like a fairytale, with all the majesty and mystery of a night-blooming tropic water lily. It was in 1936 that Miss Lily Pons of the Metropolitan Opera Company visited the water gardens of Three Springs Fisheries near Buckeystown, Md., founded by entrepreneur George Leciesther Thomas in 1917.

The legendary Miss Pons flitted onto the scene like a butterfly to light momentarily upon the lily-filled waters. A crowd of about 3,000 rimmed the perimeter of one of Three Springs' 500 ponds to watch the opera star dangle her fingers over the side of a rowboat, teasing the exotic Koi that swam under the lily pads.

Said to be a publicity stunt to bring attention to the soprano's career, the water gardens, from that day, became known as Lilypons Water Gardens. "The pun was irresistible," said Virginia Thomas, great-granddaughter of the founder of "the largest supplier of water lilies in the free world."

Relating the story as her grandmother told it to her, Thomas

said the start of Lilypons was "legendary." She said her great-grandfather had developed a thriving goldfish business with water lilies as an aside. The business grew to such an extent that in 1935, Lilypons opened its own post office and officially became a town.

Lilypons lies like an exotic island paradise on the banks of the Monocacy River and is surrounded by the fertile fields of dairy farms of nearby Buckeystown. The area has a fair amount of lime deposit, with a lime kiln just a mile away from the water gardens. Thomas explained that the lime rich soil is "extremely good for goldfish, especially for their color."

"Lilies always were the aside," said Thomas of her family's business, "until about 1978." At that time her father, Charles Thomas, whom she identified as "the most progressive aquatic nurseryman alive today," increased the emphasis on water lily propagation. "He was very interested in it, and he has turned the business into what it is today," she added.

And what it is today, is 300 acres of ponds, canals and bogs

(originally excavated by hand and with horses), that produce enough varieties of aquatic plants to fill a 75-page catalog. Lilypons fills the orders of loyal visitors to "the fish house," and mail order customers from as far as Japan, Africa, France, Germany, India, Mexico and Canada.

Water lilies come in a full spectrum of colors, ranging from white to pink, and from yellow to blue, and with foliage that is termed 'mottled,' 'speckled,' or with a 'bronze cast.' And, water lilies come in day-blooming varieties (not to be confused with the day lily that thrives along dusty country lanes), and night-blooming varieties.

Day bloomers "awaken each morning and go sleep in late afternoon," according to the glossy, color-illustrated catalog designed by Mrs. Charles Thomas, "Hardy lilies," such as the exquisite white "Virginia," named for Charles Thomas' mother, the golden "Sunrise," and the radiant red "Flammea," are available from April through September.

The tropical day-bloomers, such as the "Yellow Dazzler," and the blue "Charles Thomas," named in honor of the current owner of Lilypons, are available from June through September. And, the lotus is another aquatic plant that thrusts its stems 2 to 5 feet out of the water. Its blossoms permeate a "heady fragrance" that is "intoxicating." A Lotus Festival is held in early September each year.

But, it's the luminescence of the night blooming tropical lilies that attracts the eye of the catalog shopper. The night bloomers start to open their colorful petals at dusk, and emit their special radiance under the moonlight, well into the following morning.

"A lot of people like to get one of each," said Thomas, "so they have something blooming all the time." Thomas said the fragrance of the tropicals is "an amazing scent. If the breeze is blowing your way, it's a beautiful fragrance."

The most popular lily is the "Hardy pink". Thomas suggested that its popularity may be linked with the famous Monet painting which is spattered with their likeness. Lilies also come in a variety of sizes from the 2 to 3 feet span of the "pygmy," to the sprawling "Victoria," whose pads alone may measure 4 feet around. Prices of lilies start at \$17.95, with the most expensive lily in the catalog priced at \$95. The medium price for lilies at Lilypons is about \$25.

Thomas said water lilies are "very tough." Some varieties may even take over an earth bottom pond. She recommended the more hybrid varieties.

Planting a water lily that has



Photo Courtesy of Lilypons

This lovely water lily, the Charles Thomas, is named in honor of the current owner of Lilypons.

been freshly harvested by a wader at Lilypons is a fairly simple task; perhaps one that is best suited for a hot, sticky summer day. In an earth bottom pond, such as the typical farm pond, Thomas said, "Go in barefoot or in hip waders; push the plant into the ground. The mud will almost suck the plant in," she explained. "Make sure the crown of the plant is not under the mud." She recommended six to ten square feet of pond surface for each plant, with at least 30 percent of the pond remaining free and open.

For those who have something smaller than a farm pond in mind, Lilypons simplifies the chore of excavating and designing. The catalog outlines step by step illustrated directions for installing a pool liner or one of 12 preformed, fiberglass pools, from the 70 gallon Tear drop, to the 420-gallon Lagoon.

Waterscaping can still be achieved without the excavation of a pond. No need to fear that swampy area just back of the spring house anymore. Why not plant a bog garden? Poorly drained soils that stay wet all year are described as "ideal" for planting cattails, water poppies, the flowering arrowhead, spider lilies, lizard's tail and iris—"royalty of the bog."

Cultivating water lilies is a favorite hobby with many, including one of Lilypons' regular customers, Vice President George Bush. Lilypons is the place to become initiated into the fascinating world of water gardening.

Whatever the choice for waterscaping, Lilypons offers many items to add a special touch to a water garden. Thomas said that most people with lily ponds have a spray or waterfall which

adds not only an element of beauty, but also serves to aerate the water. Aeration is particularly important when the pond is stocked with goldfish or Koi.

The ornamental fish, in all sizes and colors, are available at Lilypons. Starting at \$3 for a pair of 2- to 3-inch "Comets," to \$195 for a pair of the imperial shimmering gold 10- to 12-inch Koi, Lilypons offers one free with each pair the customer purchases.

Koi are very popular. "The definition of their color is what makes them so valuable," said Thomas. She explained that Koi are intelligent fish that can be trained to respond to a whistle, and eat out of the hand. "People become fanatical about them" she said. "Some of the fish are fine enough that we price them individually." During the Koi Festival in early September, Thomas said they will have the big "two footers," on display.

As an added dimension to the water garden, Lilypons suggests that fountains, sculpture, waterfalls and statuary create "melodic sounds and fascinating patterns made by spilling water." Statuary displays range from 4-inch frogs to almost lifesize nymph-like children who are poised to frolic in the spray of a fountain.

On a hot August day, the trickle of water "makes it seem just a little cooler," Charles Thomas said.

Finally, there is a variety of scavengers from which to choose. Described as the "sanitation department" for the pool, snails, tadpoles, clams and mussels are sold in pairs, dozens or by the hundred. Lilypons suggests stocking one scavenger per square foot of pond area.

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Charles Thomas displays one of many statuaries Lilypons offers its customers.



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## Homestead Notes