

# ARMCHAIR GARDENING

IMAGINE A POND YOU CAN SEE INTO, THEN BRING IT  
INDOORS AND YOU HAVE AQUASCAPING - A SUBMERGED  
GARDEN TO ENJOY FROM YOUR SOFA

Photography: **GEORGE FARMER** Words: **CLARE GOGERTY**



Surrounded by tanks filled with wafting greenery, twisted pieces of driftwood and shoals of tiny fish, George Farmer explains why aquascaping – “landscape gardening underwater” – is growing in popularity. “Humans respond to colour, movement and water; aquascaping has all three,” he says. “Creating and maintaining an underwater world is therapeutic. It lowers the heart rate and reduces blood pressure. It enriches people’s lives.”

Fellow enthusiasts attending his workshop (and watching it live on his YouTube channel, which has over 59,000 subscribers) hang on to his every word. It’s easy to see why: George is the UK’s foremost aquascaper and talks about creating “natural underwater habitats” with an enthusiasm that is almost evangelical. Which is understandable when you learn that aquascaping helped him to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder following a stint with the Royal Air Force in Afghanistan. “I saw horrendous things, I shouldn’t have seen,” he says. What started as a hobby in 2002

became a full-time profession as his interest in aquascaping, and the benefits he derived from it, grew.

At the workshop, held at Aquarium Gardens, an aquascaping supplier in Huntingdon, George is creating an iwagumi landscape. This minimal, deceptively simple style of aquascaping was one of several natural-looking set-ups conceived by Takashi Amano, a Japanese aquascaper and photographer. Amano combined Japanese gardening techniques, wabi-sabi and Zen art to create the concept of the Nature Aquarium, a complete ecosystem where plants and fish live in habitats as close to natural ones as possible. “Takashi Amano changed my perception of aquariums from glass boxes to keep fish in, to underwater works of art,” says George.

This creation of natural-looking habitats is taken a step further by aquascapers who

## George Farmer’s aquascaping guide

**Avoid symmetrical designs** – they lack life and dynamism.

**Divide** your composition into thirds. **Think of the hard landscaping** as your canvas, and plants as your materials.

**Use a rimless, open aquarium** so that plants can spill out of the top, and you can add floating plants.

**This is not a fish tank:** fish are secondary to the plants, add them at the end.

*“Creating an underwater world lowers the heart rate and reduces blood pressure. It enriches people’s lives”*



- 1 (Previous page) This wonder world was created in a beginner tank, the Nano cube.
- 2 Pondlife: an aquascape at Aquarium Gardens.
- 3 Crustacean and vegetation: shrimp are introduced to prevent algae build-up.
- 4 Wood and rock are used as hard landscaping and to moor plants.
- 5 George Farmer's iwagumi aquascape in progress, seen from above.
- 6 Aquatic ferns like Microsorium are good for small tanks.
- 7 George positions pieces of driftwood at a workshop

create 'biotopes'. These mini eco-systems are exact replicas of natural habitats: a pool in an Amazon rainforest, say, or a river bed in Borneo.

Needless to say, the standard and complexity of these is high and beyond the reach of most of us. Venture into the world of aquascaping and you encounter enthusiasts bordering on the obsessive. Aquascaping contests, where competitors enter photographs of their incredibly detailed submerged landscapes, showcase the most accomplished.

At the workshop there is much discussion about filtration, CO2 infusion and how to keep algae at bay. Beginners shouldn't be daunted by technical complexities, though, says George.

Start with a small tank and choose plants, such as Java ferns, moss, cryptocorynes and anubias, that require minimal CO2, less fertiliser and low wattage lighting. "Plant densely and it's

easy to make a high impact straight away."

He carefully places three large pieces of rock and two smaller ones on a bed of substrate ("Hard landscape has the lead role in an iwagumi aquascape") into which he painstakingly inserts a carpet of tiny plants with a large pair of tweezers.

"The process of creating an aquascape is very relaxing," he says, as we all watch, mesmerised, "and it's enjoyable to look after." Planting finished, he slowly fills the tank with water.

The plants will establish and grow quickly, and a single species of tiny fish will be introduced into the aquascape to maintain its Zen-like calm.

Iwagumi is just one of many styles of aquascaping: there's a whole world of aquatic plants and hard landscaping out there to discover. Tempting for urban gardeners or anyone looking to extend their plant knowledge by introducing a tank full of watery wonder into their home. **S**

## Create your own aquascape

"Aquascaping can look overwhelming to begin with," says George, "but you can start with a small tank and see how it goes. Beginners can buy secondhand equipment to keep costs down, and look for a local plant swap group. The UK Aquatic Plant Society ([ukaps.org](http://ukaps.org)) has lots of information and a lively forum, with plenty of advice."

### What you will need

**A tank** A basic 30-litre Nano cube starter kit comes with a corner filter to keep water clean and free from algae, LED light, substrate layer and soil base (£114.99). It doesn't have a CO2 infuser, though and if you get the aquascaping bug, you (and your plants) may quickly outgrow it.

**Substrate** Special aquarium soil in which the plants grow

**Hardscape** Lumps of rock, and pieces of wood chosen and treated especially for aquascaping. George recommends Frodo stone and driftwood, treated so that it doesn't leech tannins or colour into the water.

**Plants** Grown either hydroponically (in nutrient-rich water) or as tissue-culture plants (in gel), lush, mostly green, plants can be ordered online. You will need a mix of foreground, middle ground and background plants to create your natural-looking water world. Supplement with floating plants and plants that attach themselves to wood and stone (epiphytes). Beginner plants include ferns, mosses and dwarf hair grass. [aquariumgardens.co.uk](http://aquariumgardens.co.uk) sells mixed plants in pots that can be split into several smaller plants.

**Fish** Stick to one species of small fish to drift in and out of fronds and ferns in pretty shoals. Tetras are a popular choice as they are very small and some, such as the Cardinal, are brightly coloured.

**Shrimp** These tiny crustaceans are a useful addition to a tank as they eat algae, the curse of the aquascaper.

**Water** Use tap water, which must be changed frequently.