

LOVING AND LIVING WITH PLANTS  
BY LAILA KARIM



# Taming water lilies in containers!

Water lilies are easily one of the wonders of the natural world. Defying logic, the water lily sits atop a leafy island of its own, adding that dash of colour and wealth of beauty to the most ordinary of ponds. There are numerous kinds of water-grown flowers to discuss. I shall start with our shapla.

Whenever we think about shapla, our own water lily, we are automatically transported to the scene of the wide water bodies (bil-haor or marshy land) that lay covered with these beauties in purple or white shades.

No pond in Bangladesh is complete without this aquatic flower. It is said that water lilies are some of the most beautiful plants on earth. While they ought to be another feather in spring's cap, water lilies bloom in late monsoon or hemonto. This is the time for aquatic plants to wake up from their long slumber, the first rays of the sun untouched by winter's chills signalling the plants to wake up from their hibernation.

Our padma/lotus is special not only for its heavenly beauty, but also because of its place in religious offerings. Who can forget the proverb – gobore padma phul (a flower born in dirt) while we appreciate someone's success? We also call the eyes of a lady as beautiful as the padma! Leaves of the padma are also used to describe the khonosthai jibon (a short-spanned life). The experience of watching and touching the water droplets on the leaves of this flower is unforgettable – it just slips away at the lightest touch and the bloom takes your breath away!

Certain praises came to my mind while reading a mail from Zahidul Karim, who requested me to tell him about these two flowers. 'Are there any nurseries where I can buy lotus and water lily plants? Or are there any places where I can find them? I especially need the lotus plant!'

Before I start, once again I want to tell all my readers that I am just a plant lover. My mission is to spread the love by sharing a little experience with you. Though both of

the flowers grow in mud, water, and similar conditions, they are different with their looks, origins and attributes. Water lilies grow best in a water depth of 2-5 feet and lotuses grow best in 12 inches of water. The only way to guarantee a lotus' colour is to grow the lotus roots, called rhizomes.

Lily leaves grow in a variety of colours such as solid dark green, light green, burgundy, green and burgundy or mottled pink, but lotus leaves just are one colour – green, and both the plants thrive in full sun. I shall stop here on the technical issues (as subject specialists are to educate us with more details).



Some of you may remember that once there were two pond strips in front of the army stadium. These were real visual treats to the people heading to the airport or to the north. Then some wise bosses decided to clean the rubbish (for reasons unknown) and uprooted the last root of this poor aquatic plant. I witnessed this heartbreaking scene. I grabbed some damaged roots from the pile and planted them in two charis (oval-shaped earthen container made of black clay or cement).

I applied simple techniques, filled the bottom of the charis with regular mixed

soil, dry leaves etc, fixed those roots into the mud base and then filled two thirds of the chari with water. Placed in a shaded area for about two - three months – I carefully watched their status and gradually, the roots responded to my call; they settled down in the new environment (from pond to a base of 36 inches space – similar to our urban condo life!). The new stem gradually came up to the surface with their tiny leaves and finally covered the top! And, during the late monsoon, the pink flowers made the stage show, dancing with rain and air! Though there were not many in numbers, they were good enough to make



me happy. Unfortunately later, for practical reasons, I failed to continue this love affair.

After receiving Zahidul Karim's request, I visited the nursery at Baridhara – located near the Turkish Embassy. I reaffirmed my learning with Abdur Razzak, a polite nursery staff member ( he can be contacted at 0171 819 5498) who is always ready to help the visitors and also goes for home visits (charges depend on the distance and length of his services). He updated my knowledge about the two types, their nature, criticality, availability, condition and price of local and imported ones.

I would request Zahidul Karim and others to visit him or other nurseries and check it in person. The images are from his stock of December. He was preparing the Deshi and Thai varieties for the upcoming season. He will be able to support your need, with charis/containers of different sizes. They also provide fertiliser and soil – all are available there. Razzak told me that the Thai shapla is sold here from Tk 1000 to Tk 3000. Local varieties – pink/purple – are within Tk 1000. Cement-made charis are sold for Tk 400-500.

As I mentioned earlier, shapla goes dormant or in sleeping mode during the dry winter season. It gets vibrant with the change of the season – particularly during monsoon. Nurseries usually collect the roots – young plants from their suppliers who are also importers. Razaak further informed me that he prepares the mud base by mixing the regular soil with cow dung and a bit of compost fertiliser and keeps it for a while to merge well.

Gradually the stem sprouts from the main rhizome/tuber, popping up to the water surface along with the round shaped leaves. Each stem produces one flower – the blossom opens in the early morning and usually closes by noon! For best results, remove the old leaves and stems so that the root gets time and energy to produce new ones!

Periodic supplementary food is necessary to nurture these plants. Tablet fertilisers are available here for Tk 50 or so. It is also necessary to change the container water after two or three month intervals. The roots should be divided or separated every alternate year to allow them to generate anew. After the season, clean and revamp the whole process! Only then will the shapla – padma/lotus smile upon you!

Please feel free to send me email to share your thoughts, feedback, and photos of your garden, or tell your story; ask a question on the garden issue. Send emails to [lifestyeds@yahoo.com](mailto:lifestyeds@yahoo.com)

**Photo: Courtesy: Laila Karim**