How to Start a Water Garden Club

by Gail M. Barnhill, The Tucson Watergardeners

In the midst of a busy world, forming a water garden club is one way to find kindred spirits and to have fun, too!

I'd always dreamt of having a water garden someday. Because I wasn't really sure of how to go about it and information was scarce (pre-Internet, pre-pond craze), I didn't build my first of 14 water gardens until 1991. Oh, how I had wished for a local water gardening club back then. I had so many questions and no one to ask!

After I built my first water garden, I still had lots of questions. What size pump, what kind of filter, filter media, algae problems, fish, plants, and plant sources??? For the next 8 years, I hoped someone (*else*) would start a club. I knew there was a growing interest in "ponding," as many people expressed this when my garden was on various other public tours.

During this time, I collected names of about 20 people who said to contact them if I ever started such a club. Who me? Sure, I'd been president and held just about every other office in other gardening clubs…but start a club from scratch? No way. I kept waiting for that "someone else" to do it and then cordially invite me to attend.

This past May found the Tucson Watergardeners setting up early in the day for their first Annual Plant Sale.

I gave up waiting for "someone else" in January of 1999. I called a local library branch in the center of town and asked if I could use one of their meeting rooms (they don't charge) one evening for a couple of hours. Through my favorite nursery, I learned of a lady who grew water lilies, and when I contacted her, she agreed to do a "general water gardening" program, covering some of the most basic topics. I then sent postcards to those "20 interested folks" I'd kept a list of, telling them that I was trying to start a club and had a program/speaker and hoping a few of them might show up. Much to my surprise and delight, 25 showed up (some had told friends!).

The night of the first meeting, I asked for volunteers to meet with me at a later date to mull over ideas for a club. Four volunteered, and we met for coffee one night after work. The Tucson Watergardeners' club was born!

First, Spread the Word!

One of the couples at the first meeting ran a small home water lily nursery. They offered their entire mailing list of some 200 addresses to the club for its use in 'spreading the word' around the community. This played a large part in our club's getting off to such a fast start. Many of those people are now members of the club. In just 18 months we grew to over 120 members!!!

Perhaps local nurseries could post signup sheets for folks interested in water gardening for a new club? Certainly they could post flyers to announce upcoming meetings. They might even have mailing lists they would let you use.

Select Officers & Form a Board of Directors

The first year, ask for volunteers! In addition to four officers, we initially had 4 Directors. During our second year, we had 9 Directors. Our Board makes all decisions for the club, rather than take up meeting time with the "boring" details. Hence, the more people on the board, the more input you get. Our officers' terms are for a year; the Directors hold office for two years. Each year, the outgoing Directors form a Nominating Committee to recommend their replacements to the Board and ultimately the General Membership votes on this at a meeting toward the beginning of the upcoming fiscal year. Our Board meets bi-monthly in one of the Board members' homes in the evenings.

Formulate Bylaws

This is very important. Ask other local gardening clubs if you may have copies of their Bylaws as a starting point in formulating your own. Put one person in charge, have them prepare a draft for the Board to review, publish the Board's recommended draft in your newsletter, and have the members vote on it. This gives you and those who follow a solid footing in your decision-making and helps solve, and avoid, problems later on.

Initial Year's Expenses

This was the first 'stumbling block.' I'm a single, working Mom with very limited resources. I paid for the first mailings, a coffee urn (garage sale!), cups, sugar, etc. Later, other members volunteered to foot the bills for mailings, supplies, and refreshments until we had some income. All told, I spent about $125.00 over 9 months and others spent smaller amounts until there were funds to reimburse

us. *Keep track of expenses and make sure they are agreed upon in advance by the group.*

Find Free Meeting Spaces

Libraries seldom charge, but you aren't guaranteed of a meeting place for more than 3 months at a time. As I mentioned, our first meeting was at a library. However, I then contacted the local botanical gardens and asked if they would waive the first month's charges ($35.00 a night) and let us pay on a month-to-month basis for the first year until we were established. They agreed. The room they offered accommodates about 70 people, has audio/video equipment we could use (as do most libraries), and a kitchen. At that point we asked people attending the meetings (members and visitors alike) to pay $1.00 at the door to help defray meeting room costs until we had income. Everyone seemed OK with this. After our first public pond tour that September, we happily were able to drop this $1 charge!

Programs to Keep 'Em Coming

Our initial group of 'volunteer officers/directors' brainstormed at our Board meetings and came up with some good programs. The first year, the topics were: Picking Spots & Digging Holes; Spring Pond Cleanup Discussion; Water Lilies; Biofilters; Iris In & Around Water Gardens; 'Other' Water Plants; Photography of Your Water Garden; Waterfalls; and Pond Fish & Diseases (given by a local Koi club member). Some of these programs were given by our own members. Other presentations came by recommendations of members.

In our second year we drafted a volunteer Program Chairman. He finds a lot of the programs/speakers on his own, but he also solicits its ideas and recommendations from other members.

Raising Money!

The surest way to raise a good deal of money for a pond or water garden club is a public pond tour of several of the members' ponds and gardens.

Club members are often shy about their water gardens and water gardening abilities. You need to convince them that all water gardens have something interesting to offer to folks starved for information and ideas about water gardening. We try to include ponds from all over the city, of many different construction styles, sizes, filtering (or not), professionally designed, and home-built. You need to determine your volunteer tour gardens early in the organizing process so that you can 'hype' the details to the media for publicity.

Publicity is the KEY and should be started as soon as you have the tour gardens established. The local newspaper was excited about featuring our Tour. Be sure to contact them about 2, or even 3, months ahead of the Tour to work out details. A couple of TV stations did feature stories and even a live 5 a.m. 'remote' from one of the gardens. Of course, we also sent out standard press releases to all the newspapers, television, and radio sources we could find. If you want coverage in national magazines, you really need to work far in advance, say 4 to 6 months, as they put issues 'to bed' long before they are released. *Don't pay for ads*. You can't afford one big enough to do you any good.

Next, determine your ticket selling locations. Our local nurseries, fish stores, and the botanical garden were happy to sell the tickets for us as it brought extra traffic to their stores. Out tickets consist of an 8x11 sheet folded book-style with the addresses, directions, general map, and a brief description of each garden, along with acknowledgements of commercial donations (doorprizes, printing, etc) as well as information about the club, our website, and a phone number to call for more information.

Gail (center) and a fellow club member man the Tucson Watergardeners' information booth to recruit new members.

It takes a lot of club members to staff the tour gardens, but most of them are only required the day of the Tour in 2-3 hour shifts. Our Tour was open from 8 a.m.. to 5 p.m. While the garden owners (and family or friends willing to assist them) were showing their garden and answering the public's questions, our members worked two at a time in each garden in 3-hour shifts taking tickets, offering information about the club, answering general questions, adding names to our mailing list, and giving out membership applications.

Our first year we hoped 300 people would attend the tour. Our tickets were $6.00 for visiting the 6 gardens on the tour. We sold 600 tickets…you do the math! Expenses for this first tour were $215, including printing and mailing a postcard notice to our growing mailing list of folks interested in water gardening; printing up the ticket/map/directions; and a few dozen copies of 'garden history' on each garden to be handed to visitors and returned. This didn't work; all copies walked off. I would recommend many more copies when you can afford it! The only refreshments provided on the Tour (by the garden owners) were cold water, iced tea, or lemonade. Our tickets stressed that restroom facilities were not available at the tour gardens.

Another excellent source of income is a Spring Water Plant Sale. We hold ours at a centrally located public park where we can access water taps. We set out 10 or more blue plastic kiddie pools under shady trees and filled them with water and plants donated by

our members. We found the easiest way to display the plants is to have most of them bare root or unplanted. Plant pricing can be all the same price or be based on the size of pot the plant will require upon potting up. In the case of water lilies, if the name of the variety was known, it was priced higher than those we only knew by color. Even lower priced were lilies of unknown color and variety. We also set up a display/info table with potting and fertilizing materials and methods, articles on algae control, "water gardening 101" handouts, and info on how to pot water plants, as well as a list of all plants for sale and their care. Again, advance publicity, postcard mailings, TV, press releases — all are important in making a sales successful. Our first sale lacked all publicity, except for our postcard mailing, and we still made $1250. Next year should be even better with a barrage of PR!

How to Use the Money

The first thing we did, of course, was pay back all the members who had been 'footing the bill' to get the club started.

Next, the Board decided that we should purchase liability insurance, incorporate and eventually file for IRS not-for-profit, tax exempt 501(c)3 (educational group) status.

In the future, we would like to contribute time and/or money to helping elementary and middle schools establish water gardens as a living lesson on the environment. By the way, if you have an elementary or middle school teacher in your club, and their class is interested, offer the students, their teachers (and their immediate family members) free tickets to your next public tour. We also send our monthly newsletters to interested classes and teachers.

Make the Club "Known" to Gardeners

Garden clubs are always looking for interesting programs/speakers. Contact them either directly or through your local botanical gardens and offer to do programs about water gardening for them. Soon you'll find other clubs calling you for this purpose. People generally belong to more than one garden club and they spread the word quickly. Also, contact your local Cooperative Extension Center and nurseries and offer them a program. Never charge for this service. It's a good idea to have one or two members who are fully knowledgeable about water gardening and the club handle all of these programs. Surely there is someone in your group who is comfortable speaking in public.

General Meetings

Keep 'em entertaining! True, you will have to do a little business at the start of your meetings, such as welcoming new members and visitors, asking for volunteers, announcing upcoming events, and thanking workers, but the majority of the meeting should be fun, interesting, and not so member-specific that visitors feel like outcasts.

Our meetings start with announcements, then a 20-30 minute (plus Q & A) program/speaker, then an open session on pond problems/solutions folks are experiencing, followed by a reminder of the next meeting date and program/speaker. Last of all, we have doorprize drawings. Everyone, members and visitors alike, is given a raffle ticket upon entering. Members donate excess pond plants and/or supplies for which we draw an appropriate number of doorprize tickets. I make sure to ask who donated doorprizes so that I can thank them publicly in the next newsletter. Then it's refreshment time. What is it with garden clubs and refreshments anyway? Our Refreshment Chair recruits two members to supply refreshments at each meeting.

It is important, I think, to have your meetings on the same day of the month, each month you meet. For instance, The Tucson Watergardeners meet the 4th Thursday of the month, February through October, at 7:30 p.m. at the Tucson Botanical Gardens.

I think evening meetings are the only way to go. In the old days, garden club members were mostly women who didn't have to work outside of the home, or they were retired gentlemen who could meet during the day. Meeting on weekends does not seem to work as well as weekday evenings either, as many people don't want to give up their weekends to meetings.

Newsletter

While not imperative, when searching for a volunteer Editor, try to find someone with the computer savvy to make up an attractive newsletter. Nowadays, this should be relatively easy.

Our newsletter, "Ponderings," is generally two sides of an 8 x 11 sheet. I usually manage, as president, to fill the front page with announcements, pleas for help, and kudos. Any time I mention a member in the newsletter, I always print their name in bold print – everyone loves to see his/her name in print. We try to stuff the back side with interesting articles or information we have read or learned about water gardening. If you use something from a book or magazine, be sure you have permission from the author or publication and credit them in your newsletter!

Our newsletter is sent not only to our members, but to all other garden clubs in town, as well as to water gardening vendors (with the hope that they will display it), and teachers working with water gardening in their lessons, etc. Many clubs solicit advertising from local vendors to defray the cost of printing and mailing.

Attached to our newsletter, but sent only to members, is an update sheet of new members, address changes, etc. Members are instructed to place this in their current year's membership roster so that it will remain up to date.

Membership List

We have decided to state on our club's Membership Roster that our membership list cannot be used for any commercial purposes. We found a few water gardening maintenance businesses were paying dues to join just to get their hands on our membership mailing list! We consider this a no-no.

A 'Piece of Cake'

These are the 'bones' of starting a club. No two clubs will ever do things the same way. Each finds the best way to do things for itself and, hopefully, learn some tricks from other garden clubs along the way. Many of the most active club members are also active/interested in other gardening clubs and thus have some knowledge you can tap into.

Believe it or not, as much as I dreaded starting a club, looking back, I consider it having been a piece of cake because of all the other people interested enough to help. I'd do it again in a nano-second (all the spare time I have). Too bad I can't earn a living at it!

Gail Barnhill is the president of The Tucson Watergardeners. Any club newsletters desiring to use her features, or portions thereof, are automatically given permission to do so. For more information, visit the club's website at http://tucsonwatergardeners.tripod.com or call Gail at 520-296-1074.

Groundcovers

by Linda Greenway Kinney

Provide the 'finishing touch' to your garden with groundcovers that look good all season.

Isotoma 'Bluestar Creeper' fills the gap between Japanese painted ferns and a stone pathway in the Kinney garden.

Groundcovers are all beautiful in the spring. Their fresh, new growth covers the open space between taller plants, filling in to give our gardens a rich, textured tapestry. Unfortunately, as the season progresses, many of these groundcovers continue to grow vertically and become stringy or weedy, falling over and even becoming downright invasive. I am always on the lookout for very low-growing, long-season groundcovers, and I have found some really great ones. Because they might not be splashy or sensational on their own, they are not always easy to locate at local nurseries. Creating a backdrop for other showy plants, softening rocks, or filling in the cracks, whether between stones or between plants, are really their strong points.

Arenaria, known commonly as sandwort, is hardy to zones 3 or 4, depending on species, and grows from ½-inch to 2-inches tall with a 12-inch spread.

Isotoma 'Bluestar Creeper'(syn. *Solenopsis*, shown on facing page) is a low-growing perennial with light blue summer flowers. Although preferring sun, it tolerates considerable shade, which also gives it more of a trailing habit.

In the same picture, on the right side, and shown to the right, is *Sagina subulata*, commonly called "Irish Moss", a very low grower which does especially well between stones or pavers and reseeds itself once established. There is also a golden form available, 'Aurea'. Both have tiny white summer flowers.

A plant I have recently discovered and of which I am especially fond is *Arenaria*. Also very moss-like, it is wonderful around ponds as it really appreciates moisture. The shade-loving variety, *A. balearica*, is known as Corsican sandwort and has light green leaves and star-shaped, white, early-summer flowers. The sun-loving variety, *A. Montana* has gray-green foliage and early-summer, cup-shaped, white flowers. Supposedly, both can be rather invasive, but I have mine on an island in my pond, so I am unconcerned with this. It grows in dense tufts, which push out any weeds, and can actually take some foot traffic. A very similar looking plant, Corsican mint (*Mentha requienii*) does very well south of zone 5 in shady, moist soil. It is completely prostrate with tiny, round, peppermint-scented leaves.

Sagina subulata grows only one inch high and spreads 9 inches. It is hardy in zones 5-9.

Another plant which grows so densely as to push out any possible weeds is *Muehlenbeckia.* Hardy to a zone 7, according to the book, it is frost hardy. Supposedly a vigorous grower, however, it has spread only a foot or so in six years in my garden, perhaps due to my having pushed it to its limits. It craves full sun and grows only an inch or two high with tiny, round, shiny, dark green leaves on wiry, dark stems.

Although *Muehlenbeckia complexa* (Syn. *M. axillaris*) is commonly known as “maidenhair vine,” it is commonly grown as a groundcover.

Several thymes are planted between a stone wall and the garden path. Reseeding has produced small plants in the pathway cracks.

The thyme family offers many choices of exceptional groundcovers, ranging from light to dark green foliage and all ranges of yellow and gray in between, besides variegated forms as well. Most are hardy from zones 4-9, although hardiness varies by species. My favorites are *Thymus praecox* ‘Coccineus’ (Syn. *T. serpyllum* var. *coccineus*), a low-grower that bears sweetly scented, rose flowers, and “Wooly thyme” a very low-growing, gray, hairy thyme for dry, sharp drainage.

Variegated thymes come with either white or yellow edgings to the tiny leaves.

Sedum sieboldii is not as hardy as others in the family, with a reliable hardiness in zones 6-9, but its bluish foliage and autumn blooms make it special.

There are several excellent groundcover species and varieties in the large *Sedum* family. I have planted 'John Creech' along one side of our stream where it does not suffer from fungus problems as some of the sedums do when near

Sedum spurium (two-row stonecrop) 'John Creech' blooms pink in the sunny, mid-summer garden in zones 4-9.

Growing 'John Creech' in shady conditions results in the plant maintaining its lower-growing, rosetted form displayed in the spring.

moisture. It maintains a very neat, low habit, almost like a carpet of rosettes in the spring. Then in mid- to late-summer it is covered with rose-pink flowers.

Sedum sieboldii is another favorite, low-growing succulent with large fleshy discs of glaucous-blue outlined in pink radiating out from a central base. Because it flowers in the fall, it is commonly called "October daphne." Full sun affords the best color display. A variegated form is even more colorful.

For foliage color, you can't beat *Ajuga*. Unlike their original parents, several of the newer hybrids are very restrained and do not reseed. *A. reptans* 'Burgundy Glow' is especially attractive underplanting purple or silver plants, as it grows to only 6 inches tall. *Ajuga pyramidalis* 'Chocolate Chip' and 'Metallica Crispa' display even deeper chocolate and purple leaves, but they grow 6 to 12 inches tall. *Ajuga* appreciate ample moisture.

If you want quick coverage around an area where you can't use invasive plants or even permanent plants, don't be afraid to try some annual groundcovers. Some of them are very tough, and you don't have to worry about paths or steps being overrun with perennial covers. I have planted

Although most members of the *Bacopa* family are semi-aquatic or fully aquatic, 'Snowstorm' is a terrestrial plant perennial in zones 9 and warmer. Grow it as a fast-growing annual in colder zones.

Bacopa 'Snowstorm' every spring for several years between my walk and the pond. It quickly forms a flat mat of rich green leaves and constantly blooming, small, white flowers. ❧

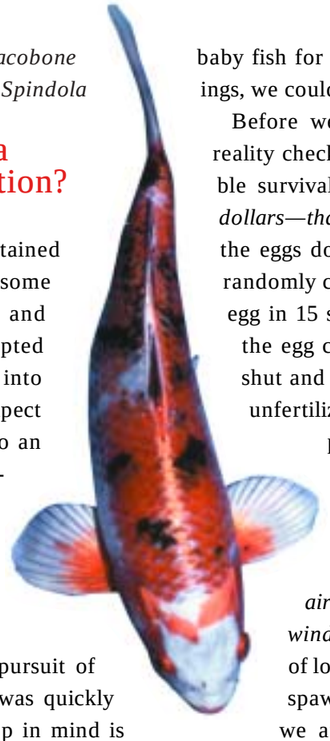
Linda Greenway Kinney gardens in Yellow Springs, Ohio.
For more views of her garden artistry, see page 60.

Burgundy-leaved *Heuchera* and Japanese painted ferns combine for an incredible color combination with *Ajuga reptans* 'Burgundy Glow.'

Getting Rich with Koi

by Ray Giacobone
Photos by Bob Spindola

Could growing Koi be a money-making proposition?



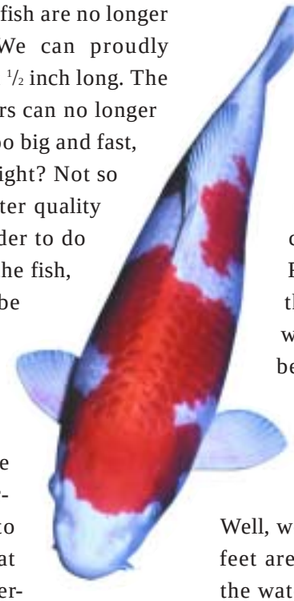
Many of us have entertained the thought of raising some Koi for ourselves and maybe making a few dollars. Tempted with these ideas, I decided to look into it further to see just what to expect before I started. I decided to go to an expert to get background information. I had seen some nice standard and butterfly Koi, as well as goldfish, from Blackwater Creek Fish Farm and was lucky enough to get a gracious invite from Joe and Cheryl Pawlak. In pursuit of this higher level of knowledge, I was quickly taught that the key phrase to keep in mind is "fish *Farming*." You see, you say the phrase with an extra emphasis on "Farming." Plant your crop, let it grow, and if everything goes right, make a profit. Like any farming endeavor, it's very hard to make everything come out perfect. We need to look at the different dynamics involved to help our success.

The average female will lay about 60,000 eggs per pound of body weight. Let's use a 10-pound female for our example. That means we should get about 600,000 eggs. Now, the first thought is "Wow, what a bonanza! If we could sell those baby fish for a dollar a piece, in two spawnings, we could be rich!!!"

Before we quit our jobs, let's do some reality checks here and find out the probable survival rates. (*Gee, survival—million dollars—that sure rings a bell.*) First off, all the eggs don't get fertilized. In fact, if the randomly cast sperm doesn't penetrate the egg in 15 seconds, the water contact with the egg causes the egg to slam its doors shut and nothing gets in. The result is an unfertilized egg. How many eggs will probably be fertilized? The average for a typical adult female is about 30,000. This is assuming every spawning works right. (*Boy, the millionaire dreams just jumped out the window.*) Add to this the probability of losing 1.5 batches out of every ten spawnings for various reasons. But we are going to stay on a positive note and say every spawning works. Hey, 30,000 dollars a spawn – I'm not too unhappy.

Let's get to the work of raising those babies up to size. A pond must be prepared. It must provide plenty of small-sized, live food and maintain good water quality for our developing fry. While diligently providing these good conditions, you are also providing good conditions for small predators. It just so happens that eventually along will come some unwanted guests like dragonfly nymphs and water boatmen that find the fry a great entrée for their sushi needs. Before we know it, they voraciously are feeding on our babies. Losses are probably about 10% if you catch it in time and find a way to kill off the air-breathing insects. Well, not so bad, I kept my oxygen levels up and have a good supply of live food. Oh! By the way we need to be checking water quality every night because the algae growing in the pond can sometimes rob the water of oxygen very quickly when it gets dark. If not careful, it is very possible to wake up in the morning to a slew of oxygen-deprived dead fish. We will assume the water quality has been diligently maintained, so we still have 27,000 babies left and, boy, are they munching on those protozoans, rotifers, and water fleas. You can almost see them grow.

After a couple of weeks the fish are no longer just two eyes and a tail. We can proudly announce that the babies are a ½ inch long. The nymphs and boatmen predators can no longer eat them because the fry are too big and fast, so you are out of the woods, right? Not so fast! Even if we have kept water quality levels up, which is getting harder to do because of the larger sizes of the fish, they are now big enough to be seen by birds, spiders, turtles, snakes, and other predators. Oh, gee, more losses! What are the probable losses? On the conservative side, let's say another 10 percent. We are now down to 24,300 fish. This assumes that there will be no losses to waterborne parasites like *Argulus*, *Lernia*, *Costia* and *Tricodina*. Okay, 24,300 fish, we can live with that. Let's drag a net and see just how beautiful these fish are. Upon checking, we find some malformed fish. Bent bodies, missing operculum (gill covers), and missing eyes occur more frequently than most people think. Discards, those that haven't developed right, could run very high if the fish you mated are too closely related. But let's stay with our averages and discard 20 percent. We have 19,400 fish left.



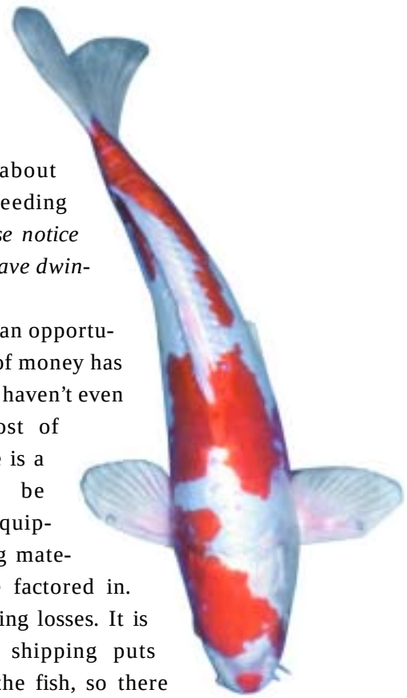
Growth continues and we now must switch to a small, pelleted feed. When the fish are up to 2 to 3 inches long, it's time to cull again. This time we are looking for good bodies and color. There is a good chance that 20% will be poorly colored. Solid orange, solid white, and grays are very common. Let's not even get into the Gin Rin, Doitsu, and butterfly characteristics that are commonly desired and which would greatly reduce our keeper numbers, if we were breeding for those characteristics. If the baby shows some potential to develop good color, he will be kept and given a chance to show his stuff at a 4 to 6 inch length. Well, we have finished the second cull, and our feet are a maze of wrinkled skin from being in the water for so long. The tally? It's now down to 13,500 fish after the cull, and predation has taken its toll. It's starting to look like we aren't going to get very rich at this business. But let's

grow them out some more and salvage a few bucks for our effort.

Now you are at 4 to 6 inches and it is time to start selling some fish. The fish that haven't developed as hoped need to be separated out. No, we don't have to trash them; there is a market for them in the wholesale pet store trade called "pond run." Hopefully, you can get 15 cents apiece, although the pet store will sell them to the public for $3 to $7 each. The new cull and continued predation now puts us at 8800 fish. To finish the cull we need to separate out the average fish, called 'decoratives.'

A collective thought here says we have 1750 decorative or better fish. It includes decoratives, selects, and show quality or breeders. The decorative fish can be sold wholesale, for at least the dollar a piece that we planned. Not much left after all that work!

True, we can get more money for the selects and shows, so we have to see how many there are. The selects are nicely colored and patterned fish, which can get at least double the price of the decorative group, but there are only about 250 of them in the bunch. From the selects, we take out the show quality and find only about 10 that have the potential to show quality or breeding stock. The show and breeder fish still have to be grown out farther before we can expect any amount of money for them. Even then, some of the ten, in fact, most of them, won't reach that higher level of quality. Oh yes, I can't forget to tell you, expect to lose about 15% of your breeding stock a year. *Please notice how the numbers have dwindled.*



What looks like an opportunity to make a lot of money has quickly fizzled. We haven't even mentioned the cost of food, power (there is a lot of water to be moved), labor, equipment, and shipping materials that must be factored in. Don't forget shipping losses. It is well known that shipping puts quite a stress on the fish, so there will also be losses of about 10 percent.

In conclusion, that pretty fish that you just bought at the store, took home, and are so proud of, took a lot of money, time, and labor to produce. No wonder those beauties cost what they do. I don't think this is the way we are going to get rich!

Many thanks to Joe and Cheryl Pawlak of Blackwater Creek fish farm in Deland, Florida, for taking time from their many tasks of raising their quality fish and shipping them all over the country to help provide information for this article. *Ray Giacobone is a retired science teacher from Troy, Michigan, who now indulges himself with writing and giving programs on ponding topics. He most recently spoke at the Iowa Pond Expo, lugging in four microscopes and live Trichodina!*

Mother Knows Best

by Chuck Thomas

Mom teaches fish-expert son

how to train fish to eat from your hand!

Often people come in our shop and say, "I hardly ever see my fish. They're so scared." A common occurrence, it takes fish awhile to adjust to their new environment. Because food is the best motivator, I always inquire about feeding techniques. The usual answer: "I toss out some floating pellets, but the fish don't come up. Later, when I come back, the food is gone."

Pond fish are wild and have to be domesticated. You have to show them you are their friend. The best way to obtain their attention is to withhold food for a week. I know this sounds cruel, but your pond is a mini-ecosystem and natural food finds its way into the water. Invertebrates in the form of insect larvae, earthworms, and bloodworms provide numerous snacks. While not enough to keep fish actively growing, they can help supplement your fish's diet and prevent starvation.

I first began to think about this several years ago after my mom's pond had been installed for only a couple of weeks. I asked how her fish were doing. She said, "Oh, fine. I've got them eating out of my hands now." Totally shocked, I asked, "How in the world did you do that in such a short time?" My dad interrupted and said, "Well, if they want to eat, that's the only way she'll feed them." We walked down to her pond and I watched as she moved a chair next to the pond, took some fish food in her hand, bent over, and began talking to the fish. They gathered around like small children clamoring for a piece of candy. She talked gently to them, chastising the larger Koi for being so piggish and not letting the smaller shubunkins work their way up for their share. She continued rationing out the food and talking to them for 10 minutes or so.

As I watched, I realized several important factors. One was food is the key motivator to get and keep a fish's interest. Let's face it, a back rub doesn't do a whole lot for a fish. Also important is body visibility and proximity to the pond. Mom's fish weren't frightened of movement outside the pond which might normally cause fear.

While a student at Auburn University, I worked at the fisheries research station where I was fascinated with the fish-training by a graduate student. Every afternoon he called the fish to their daily ration by whistling for them. Just like Pavlov's dog responding to a bell, (while probably not salivating, but maybe they did) they rushed to the side of the pond for dinner. I guess if I ate once a day, I'd come when someone whistled, too! But this shows the importance of other stimuli for your fish besides the mere presence of food — your voice.

When Mom wants to show off her fish, she sits down by the pond and starts talking to them. As they all race over to her, she dangles her fingers in the water. Even if she doesn't have food to offer, they suck on her fingers. (It feels like a baby sucking on your finger, if you're curious).

Chuck's mother, Christine, quickly trained her fish to eat from her hand. *Photo by Chuck Thomas.*

Important steps to make your fish friendlier or to train them to eat from your hand begin with not feeding for a week. Once you've gotten their attention, make a daily ritual of coming to the pond and sitting in the same spot at the pond's edge. Talk gently to the fish while holding a pellet of food under the water. They will usually circle at a distance, but the smell of that steak cooking on the grill will be too much for them. Pretty soon a brave one will come close enough to take the food. Do not make quick or sudden movements that might frighten them. Remember, anything outside the pond means trouble, so their natural instinct is to run and hide.

The soothing and gentle tone of your voice gives them comfort and assurance. Believe me, they can hear you. Fish don't have ears as we perceive them, but instead they have a mechanism called lateral lines. These run parallel down their body and allow them to receive sound waves transmitted through the water.

With the enticement of food, non-aggressive body language, and soothing and gentle conversation, you can have your fish eating out of your hands in no time. This method can be used with any variety of fish, but results will be quicker during the warmer months when the fish are more actively feeding.

Well, I may be a grown man now, but once again Mom has taught me new and important things about life: if we slow down and take time to work with our fish, they will become our best friends, if only for the food!

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