

Chapter 1

Going “Koi Kichi” — Crazy for Koi

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering koi: More than just a pretty fish
 - ▶ Seeking your own level of koi enjoyment
 - ▶ Grasping the basics of a koi pond
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Getting started with koi may seem to take a lot of effort. So what's to love about them — they're just fish, right? Sure, like a diamond's just a lump of carbon or a Beatles' song is just a collection of musical notes. Koi are the ultimate in fish, combining size, beauty, and grace in one plump package (or rather several plump packages because koi don't like to live alone). Because their ponds are designed to literally complement the fish, the ponds add to the aesthetics of koi ownership. When you watch koi slowly wheel around in their pond, you're observing creatures who occupy another world, one without strife, argument, crowded roads, or any of the other dubious benefits of civilization.

But you didn't pick up this book to figure out our philosophy of koi-keeping, although you'll probably find it sprinkled in here and there. You wanted to know what koi are, what it takes to keep them, and what makes seemingly normal people get crazy about them.

Your questions have you headed in the right direction and you're in the right place. This is the book that tells you how to get started with koi, how to keep them alive and healthy, what to feed them, and how to distinguish the different varieties.

Appreciating the Beauty of Koi: The Underground Fad

Koi can help bring beauty and serenity into your life, and you can enjoy them for those reasons alone. Watching your koi gracefully turn in the seemingly bottomless waters before they come to the surface to nibble food from your fingers can be a calming end to a hectic day.



But koi have another level of appreciation and it's based on their classification. Many koi have been selectively bred to exhibit a particular color or pattern. Depending on the criteria you select, koi come in about 13 varieties. Each color or pattern has a Japanese name, which is where the koi terms you may have heard come into play. With the help of Chapter 2, you'll be able to recognize the basic koi colors.

Koi also have Japanese names for the subcategories of skin type and markings, but, alas, that discussion's beyond the scope of this book. (We wanted you to have something to look forward to on your first trip to Japan, the koi-keeper's Mecca!)

Just like purebred dogs, koi have various levels of quality, with some Kohakus, for example, being better than other Kohakus. You can always read about a good breed, but going to a koi show to watch the judges evaluate the fish is a lot more fun. In Chapter 16 we provide some pointers on what you can expect from these koi shows and reasons why you should go even if you're not entering the competition.

Of course, lots of koi don't fit into specific categories; these mixed strains, whose parents were of two different color- or scale-types, are still gorgeous but don't match the standard classifications. Although you aren't able to show these koi in a competition, they add lots of color and interest to your pond. We include a color-photo section in this book so you can see the myriad colors of koi that just may leave you starry-eyed.

The Three Types of Koi-Keepers

Koi-keeping often becomes quite a social pastime, although not necessarily so. If you do interact with other enthusiasts, it may help to know what you have to look forward to (and where you may be heading as well!).

The koi market has three levels of koi-keepers:

- ✓ **The *koi kichi* (koi crazy) bunch:** These folks buy very expensive koi, so it follows that they know a lot about koi and how to keep them. These individuals feel the best koi are *nishikigoi* (koi from Japan) and they're able to pay the price. Not surprisingly, this is the smallest of the three groups.
- ✓ **The competitive sort who set koi-keeping boundaries:** The second level of koi fanciers are those who enjoy koi, exhibit them in competitions, and form the backbone of koi clubs. They buy good koi no matter where the koi hails from (although all things being equal, they, too, prefer Japanese koi).
- ✓ **The casual hobbyists:** The third group is by far the largest. These hobbyists want good-looking fish that get big and do well in a pond. They want fish with *bling* (which explains why metallic koi are so popular in the United States!). Some of these individuals eventually join the competitive middle group, and some even move into the upper echelon of the koi kichi group. But as casual hobbyists, they furnish most of the money that runs the koi industry, and they're happy with koi from Israel, Hawaii, South America — basically anywhere.

Knowing the Essentials for Any Koi-Keeper

Before we really get started, we want to point out some essentials concerning these fascinating fish and what goes into keeping them.

The winner for “Most Obvious”: Koi

Koi do get big (24 inches or more) and they need a good-sized pond, but you can have just as much fun with a \$10 koi as one that costs \$200. (And yes, koi can run \$20,000, but we don't see how anyone can have fun with a fish that costs that much. As you read on, you discover just what makes certain koi so much more desirable to own and why those koi judges are so taken with them.) Please see Chapter 16 for more information on the standards for judging koi.

A transitional home for your koi

In addition to a permanent home for your koi, you need a second, temporary place to quarantine new fish. A quarantine tub allows you to adjust your koi to its new environment gradually. It also

allows you to observe them for a time so that those with contagious diseases don't find their way into your main pond and infect your other fish. A transitional tub can also serve as emergency quarters if some calamity strikes your pond and as a hospital area where you can treat sick and injured fish. See Chapter 13 for discussions on this temp housing.

A permanent home for your koi (most likely a pond)

Like making Welch Rarebit ("First start with a rabbit"), if you're going to keep koi, first you have to start with a pond. Pond design and construction have only a few unbreakable rules:

- ✔ Keep the design simple: a rectangle, square, or circle. These shapes are easiest to clean via a filter. If your heart is set on a dumbbell-shaped pond, keep goldfish, not koi.
- ✔ The pond size may surprise you by being smaller than you thought. The minimum size is 6 x 9 feet and 4 feet deep, and it provides plenty of room for a few koi.

However, little koi grow into big koi (24 inches long or more), and they need room to swim. We feel honor-bound to warn you that koi-keepers tend to build bigger and bigger ponds to accommodate this growing hobby as time goes on.

If you think that koi just may be the fish for you, we guide you through the different styles of ponds and their settings in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 so you know which ones take more work and money and which ones take less.

Pond gadgets: The filter and pump

Status in pond size sets in when the numbers go over five figures, as in a 15,000-gallon pond. But, before you hyperventilate thinking about the work to maintain *gin-clear* (the koi-keepers' term for *clean*) water in a honking-big pond, remember that the pond's filter does most of the work. In Chapter 6 we give you the basics on filter and pump selection. (We group the two together because they go together. The filter only strains the bad stuff out; you need the pump to move the water through the filter.)

Koi eat a lot and produce a great deal of waste, so your pond needs a multifunction filter that can handle mechanical and biological filtration (usually in different parts of the filter), and it needs drains in the bottom of the pond to feed that filter.

Note: Because koi breathe the oxygen dissolved in the water, use a supplementary air pump to add oxygen to the water. The easiest design *bubbles* the air through the top section of the filter drains.

In selecting the right filter and pump, look for a number on the equipment that indicates the gallons-per-hour it can process. The filter and pump must be able to *turn over* (cycle) the water in your pond every two hours. The larger the pond, the larger the filter and pump must be. In case you’re wondering about the power consumption, in Chapter 6 we explain how to figure out your per-year costs to operate any pump. (And no, your utility bill doesn’t have to be a bad surprise every month.)



The more you hold your utility costs down, the more money you have to spend on koi. Don’t you just love saving money?

Understanding the Demands of a Koi Pond

Although the filtration system performs much of the pond maintenance, you still have to maintain the system and the quality of the pond water. These tasks consist of the following:

- ✓ **Backwashing (cleaning the filter):** This process has two steps that take little time and effort:
 - Swishing pond water back through the filter to dislodge all the crud the filter has removed
 - Opening a valve so the cruddy water empties out of the filter

Some filters have actual filter mats (a bit like those in your central air conditioner) that you physically remove from the filter, shake or spray off to dislodge the debris, and then replace.

- ✓ **Checking pond chemistry:** You can opt for expensive testing equipment, but a simple \$35 kit with test strips is quite adequate. The various colors on the dipped test strips can tell you a lot about the quality of your pond water and whether your filter is doing its job. Chapter 9 gives you goals for your water’s ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, and pH, and we explain what to do if any values are out of the safe range.

Keeping Koi Healthy: A Brief How-To

The easiest way to keep your koi healthy is by keeping the water clean, but other factors come into play. Chapter 13 tells you what problems to watch out for and how to handle them if they do show up. The following list is a glimpse of the most important ways you can protect your koi:



- ✓ **Minimize koi stress.** One factor in koi illness is stress because koi just don't *do* stress well. Moving a koi into a new pond, overcrowding koi, or introducing sudden water temperature changes can all stress koi. Stress drop-kicks the immune system, and then every opportunistic bacteria or parasite takes advantage of the situation. Chapter 12 helps you recognize some of the causes of stress and explains how to head off some of the effects.
- ✓ **Always quarantine new fish.** You may have thought quarantines went the way of the dodo and the bubonic plague, but for koi, quarantining new fish is the only way to prevent possibly fatal pondwide problems. Setting up a quarantine pond or tub is easy (and you can use the same tub for raising koi babies if you somehow — despite or because of your efforts — end up with koi eggs). We explain the equipment and the process of quarantining in Chapter 5.
- ✓ **Adjust your koi's environment according to weather.** Wintertime brings prolonged cold temperatures that are hard on creatures that can't produce their own heat to stay warm. When water temps fall, koi literally cannot function; they can't digest food (so you don't feed them for weeks on end), and they have trouble swimming. Watching koi slowly maneuver in a 55-degree pond would be almost comical if it weren't so sad.

In Chapter 9 we offer alternatives to letting your koi overwinter outside. You can avoid some of the cold-water problems by covering your pond and even more of them by covering and heating your pond. In this chapter we also offer some fairly easy pond-covering solutions and talk about heating choices that fit your pond and your pocketbook.
- ✓ **Pay attention to your fish.** Just like you would for a pet dog or cat, be sure to inspect your koi if you notice strange behavior. Koi are particularly subject to skin ulcers when the water temperature is in the mid-60s, which is typical of an early spring warm-up. In Chapter 13 we show you how to circumvent ulcers and capture your koi so you can treat them.

Koi are subject to external parasites. Your koi's skin may suddenly be peppered with white dots or dangling, hairlike tendrils. (*Oh, yuck, you say, and we agree.*) Maybe their fins develop little, clear dabs of jelly (except these jelly spots have eyes!).

Parasites are a normal part of life for koi, but they're not inevitable. You can get rid of the parasites without having to touch a single one. Chapter 13 gives you the lowdown on these lowlifes.

Joining a Koi Club: What It Can Do for You; What You Can Do for It

Misery may love company, but so does a new hobby. Joining a koi club can help you by giving you immediate access to people who probably know a lot more about koi-keeping than you do (and some are even crazier about koi than you are). When something goes wrong, you have people right there to help you ID the problem and suggest ways to correct it. If your liner springs a leak or you have a radical problem with your pond on a Sunday afternoon, koi club members rally around with their show ponds, extra filters, and aerators to safely house your pets until you can get your big pond operational again. That kind of support means a lot.



At the meetings, you gain all sorts of valuable insight. For example:

- ✔ You can painlessly get the information you need — or soon discover you need — in a convivial atmosphere.
- ✔ You get insider information such as who's upgrading their ponds and selling their old filter systems because they're too small for a 20,000-gallon pond. (How big is that? A bit larger than 25 x 25 feet.) You also get the inside scoop on who's ready and willing to make a koi trade.
- ✔ You can find out when and where the shows are so you can see for yourself that those show koi certainly aren't any prettier than yours.
- ✔ You get a heads-up on breaking news such as a new disease or new legislation, both of which can be destructive.

When the news first came out about koi herpes virus (KHV), which is both highly communicable and deadly for koi, the clubs were first to spread the word. They also provided ongoing funding for research and set up more effective quarantine protocols.



In addition to helping you and your koi, your club participation can help the hobby as well. Koi clubs are the first line of defense and information for any rule making that may inadvertently include koi (like the invasive-species issue).

Magnifying Your Pleasure: The Many Ways to Enjoy Your Koi

Of course, you can sit beside your pond and enjoy your koi all by yourself, but you can also increase the fun in so many ways. Check out the following suggestions:

- ✓ **Get creative with the landscape.** What kind of plantings do you have around your pond? Are you content with neatly mowed grass (which you can no longer fertilize due to runoff affecting your pond)? Does the idea of a Japanese landscape, where forms and colors are balanced by placement and mass, intrigue you? Chapter 8 can help you select plantings and accessories for your pond-surround.
- ✓ **Let your koi multiply.** Do you enjoy your koi so much you'd like more? Breeding koi isn't difficult:
 - Hatching the eggs just takes a show pond and an aerator.
 - Taking care of the young is a cut and dried process as long as you can handle the every-four-hour feedings and the culling to reduce the numbers to a manageable level.Chapters 14 and 15 show you what you need to know from start to finish.
- ✓ **Sign up for a koi show.** After you have a few good-looking koi, you may want to see how they measure up at koi shows. These shows are held every spring and summer, and they're a great way to meet other koi-keepers, buy supplies, and maybe, just maybe, purchase another koi or two. **Note:** You don't *have* to buy koi at a show, but if you start looking at them, you're probably sunk. We tried to warn you.