

From Pond Keeper to Koi Keeper

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Introduction

The UK is one of the countries in the world which has a thriving Koi keeping community. Jokes are made that the pigeon keepers of old, fancied a bit of colour, so they built a pond. However, the essence is; we humans love to surround ourselves with beautiful things. Describing Koi as 'Living Jewels' is certainly not an understatement. The grace and beauty of a perfectly formed Kohaku or Sanke (types of Koi), sitting at the surface of your pond asking for food is wonderful.

The relaxation that can be derived from watching your prized pets interacting like a well rehearsed gymnastics team can be a necessity, not a pleasure. There are people out there with highly stressed lives who need their daily fix by the pond; where clear thoughts and strategising can happen without judgment or betrayal. Some describe the influence that Koi can have on humans as a lesser drug to interacting with dolphins.

Once the 'Koi bug' has struck it really does get under your skin. Many of our clients on first viewing did not understand the whole Koi keeping 'thing'. Over time though, the welcoming view of 20 large Koi swimming towards them on arrival next to a friend's pond (asking for food) niggled away at them. Until finally, they break! "This year sweetheart, we are going to build a Koi pond!"

The question is what is the route from pond keeper to Koi pond keeper?

Speaking to many clients there seems to be a distinct correlation between the stories of present day Koi keepers and how their journey to madness started. The article intends to highlight a typical journey for a pond keeper and some of the issues they have faced on their way to Koi pond owner.

Step 1 - Getting permission from your 'better half'

Breaking the news that you wish to build a pond in your garden can be likened to informing your loved ones that eating fast food seems a far better option than sitting through one more of their roast meals. Many new converts will find themselves faced with horror as those words "I am building a pond" land on the ears of other garden users. They often consider the very thought an abomination. Your usual ally may react with red faced anger with sweat beading off the forehead. They may try the subtle art of selective hearing as a ploy to turn your thoughts to more important matters like the new widescreen, sofa or spa pool. Those hard earned pennies may have already been allotted elsewhere and as the dream of new technology fades, be gentle! Your wish may be adamantly driven through to its conclusion, but there are plenty of ways to skin a cat.

You then need to seek permission. At this point I might suggest some sort of bribery; a present or maybe tickets to that West End show the gardener always wanted to see. As you wade in with both feet and explain that the patch you had in mind had always been waste land be warned; this is when a finely drawn scrap of paper is brought from the mantle. It may explain that this patch was in fact earmarked for an allotment or Japanese garden. The discussions may go on late into the night. By morning you will arrive weary-eyed at a satisfactory conclusion. Compared to this, a position as a UN ambassador may seem an easy option. Normally this truce translates to you being allowed to have a pond, but not of the magnitude you originally intended. Your 'lake Hudson' will have to wait for another day.

Step 2 - The Purchasing Trip

Whether your interest in water in the garden came from 'Grand designs' or 'Groundforce', it makes no difference. The common route to obtaining your first pond would be down at the local garden/aquatic centre. Here you have a 50:50 chance of speaking with someone who actually understands the products they are selling, or a Saturday helper working for beer money who really wants to go back to bed. One thing is for sure, they will know a little more than you and as a result you will spoon feed every word, thinking this advice is good. (Trust me I know, many years ago, I was that Saturday boy).

The advice they give, may also be based on the fact that the stock room is full of a certain product and they have been asked to shift at all costs to make room for new products. A large percentage of people will opt for the pre-formed liner route. A pre-shaped shell manufactured from plastic or fibreglass that needs to be buried in the ground. It will normally have shelves to incorporate plants known as marginal shelves.

One may have done some research and realised that unless the pond is to be filled with plants the water needs to be kept clear some other way. It will be at this point that your attention is drawn to an array of pumps and filters. Normally you will be sold a water pump that drives the water up to the filter. A small length of hose will be suggested to transfer the water from the pump to the filter. The filter, will by definition be a black/green plastic box with foam and maybe some brushes or flocor (like hair curlers). This will usually sit at the top of a waterfall and will return the water to the pond by gravity. This style of filter is called 'Pump fed' as the water arrives at the filter from a pump. Later I will discuss gravity fed.

You stack the car full of new pond goodies and head home with a large pond strapped to the roof! The adventure has begun; weekends will never be the same again!

Step 3 – The Build

The area agreed and designated for the pond will normally be the least suitable for plants. This normally translates into a poor place for a pond to be sited. It will probably be in a dark and desolate corner where all the trees shed their leaves. Not the best scenario for a pond. One autumn will teach the fledgling pond keeper that this can make life very difficult. Removing a few wheel barrows full of leaves in spring is not the most fun of chores I can assure you.

The pond will be built over maybe a couple of weekends as the digging of the hole and getting that pond level are just not as easy as it looks in the guide. Once the liner has been set and you have finished the aesthetics with planting etc. water is added with great anticipation. As you switch on the pump and watch the water cascade down the waterfall, you feel a great sense of jubilation. At this time, many of you will notice the pond water dropping rapidly. As your heart sinks you realise there is a problem. Where is the leak? It could be something as simple as a pipe not connected correctly, or worse, it could be under ground. Hours of investigation will show where the leak is and a patch fix is made using silicone or some other product. It will normally occur on the waterfall. It doesn't matter how careful you were, water will find its way through any small pin hole and the number of people who have a story to tell about their first waterfall is amazing. Let's assume that the leak is found and fixed in some way (otherwise this article could take longer than anticipated to read!).

Step 4 – Your First Fish

The inclusion of the first goldfish or Sarasa Comet is a great moment, and the poor little blighter really does not know what is in store for it. After a couple of weeks the sponge in the filter will get blocked. As a result, said pond keeper may find the filter overflowing with water and the pond half empty. After a great panic the sponge will be cleaned and all will return to normal.

Step 5 – Your First Summer

As summer approaches and the pond heats up, the water will start to turn green. This is perfectly normal but the visual enjoyment of your pond suddenly becomes a thing of the past. That 'crystal clear water' guarantee you were given with the filter was not worth the paper it was written on. At this point you will jump onto the internet or buy a book to understand why the water is going green. In simple terms, single celled algae common in all water start to flourish. The aquatic plants included in the pond will normally have fertiliser tabs pushed into the roots. As a result you are harbouring water which is warm, nitrate rich and fairly well aerated if the waterfall is working correctly. The water turns green almost instantaneously under such conditions.

Step 6 – The Solution to Green Water?

The advice given on the net is to purchase a UV or ultra violet clarifier. This advice is correct but there are some discrepancies amongst professionals as to how many watts of UV are needed per 1000 gallons or circa 4500 litres. The UV is purchased (normally too large) and the water quickly becomes clear again. Unfortunately, by removing the single celled algae problem you restore clarity to the water and give a monopoly to something else. The shading that was being provided by the green water has now gone. As a result the same conditions provide a perfect nest bed for blanket weed (stringy weed from the side of the pond). Over a couple of days the blanket weed will almost take over

the pond and the pump may start drawing the string into the impellor. As a result, the waterfall slows, clarity is reduced and the fish start to look rather unhappy. The next option is to clean the pond pump and remove the blanket weed by hand by pulling at it vigorously. This then propels millions of blanket weed spores into the pond and increases the problem exponentially within a few days as the blanket weed comes back with a vengeance.

Back on the internet again to find a solution to blanket weed. There are chemicals, barley straw, electrical gadgets, magnets; but which is right for you? Here is the interesting bit. There is no one right answer. Water is different everywhere depending on which water authority supplies you and which day the water is being provided. Normally a fellow pond keeper will suggest a solution that worked for them. Unfortunately this will not always work for you. What's good for the goose is not always good for the gander. Eventually after many 'bum steers' a solution is found and the pond harmony is once again restored. Surely nothing else could go wrong at this point.

Step 7 – More Fish...

Once the pond problems have been sorted you feel confident enough for another pond purchasing trip. This time it is for more fish. As you walk into the aquatic centre, a large pond is often bragging about the size and beauty of its Koi. You're promising yourself that you won't be tempted, but you can't help fall for their beauty and charisma. The purchasing trip may include basic gold fish and some fantails, although you may decide to purchase a golden orfe and a small Koi. What's the harm?

The problem is these fish can grow to over 60 cm's in length if given the opportunity. Your pond depth will normally be around 18 inches in your pre-formed liner which is not deep enough. The water in the pond will be a few hundred gallons maximum if you are lucky and therefore temperature fluctuations will be large. The sun will heat this water extremely quickly and the water will lose heat rapidly at night when the sun disappears. When the pond water is hot the metabolism of the fish is accelerated and the fish will hunt aggressively for live food in the pond as well as the food you are feeding. Your love for these fish will grow as quickly as their appetite. The fish will grow in size very quickly and your little Koi may start to look rugby ball shaped.

Step 8 – Diagnosing your Koi Problems

Back on the net to see what is wrong with your Koi. Investigation will show that a Koi needs depth to exercise its muscles correctly. The rugby ball shaped body is simply a reaction to being in water that is too shallow. You also notice that the larger fish are swimming at the surface looking like they are gasping for air and they are looking very unhappy. Why is this?

Dissolved oxygen in water has what they call a different saturation point as the temperature changes. Warm water cannot sustain as high a level of dissolved oxygen as cold water. As a result, the larger fish that need more oxygen start to lag and some may die in hot conditions. Back onto the net again to find out what is wrong, both with the shape of the fish and the gasping. Shock horror! The pond water needs aeration to include more dissolved oxygen and even worse, the pond is too small! In the short term you race to an aquatic centre to buy a pond aerator and an air stone to sustain the fish. Inclusion of this is phenomenal and within no time the fish look happy. Although not the best way to include air into your pond, this solution does help restore a balance for the time being.

Step 9 – The Next Step...

That information about the size and depth of the pond starts to eat away at you. This is a crossroads. Do you love the Koi and orfe so much you want to keep them? If the answer is yes, then a new pond build is the only option (this two-step approach has been followed hundreds of times by many pond keepers who eventually move on to become Koi keepers). If the answer is no, a small note will be placed on the local notice board asking whether someone can re-home some fish which are now too large for your pond.

For those of you that decide to take the first option and build a new pond there are a couple of options. You may build an interim pond e.g. not the pond you dreamt of, but deeper with better filtration. Alternatively, you may jump into a custom-built Koi pond. In the next article, we will assume that your next pond will be designed specifically for Koi from the outset. Join us again for the next issue from Head Squared Aquatics.

If you have any queries about this article or you wish to make your own contribution, then please contact us at aquatics@headsquared.co.uk. For more articles from Head Squared please visit www.headsquared.co.uk/articles.