

Preparing Koi for a Show

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by Ray Jordan

I frequently get asked about how I prepare my koi to do their best at a show. There are no secret formulas or magic beans that I am aware of to prep your koi. It is really all about healthy koi and healthy water.

Short answer: Keep your koi as healthy as possible all year long by keeping your water quality as high as possible. High water quality is keeping oxygen levels at saturation and 0 levels of ammonia and nitrites. Also means keeping organic levels very low. Do not over feed your koi or feed the wrong types of food. Perform regular water changes of 10% to 25% per week with higher amounts of water changed when feeding at higher rates. Stop feeding koi for one to two weeks prior to show. Catch and transport them very carefully to avoid injury to the show. (See article on this website about transporting koi)

Long answer: This involves a little more detail. Koi are judged at shows based on their overall health and also their color and beauty. Genetics is at most 50% of a koi's beauty. Koi keeping practices is at least as important. A koi's overall health will be the biggest factor in how brilliant the color and beauty of a Koi. Preparing koi to look their best and achieve their maximum potential is a year round endeavor. Since our club show is a fall show let's use that as our example. (Tactics would be a little different for spring shows due to females being full of eggs.)

Previous fall/winter: Feeding is always a critical factor in proper koi development and health. As temperatures drop in late fall you need to switch to a wheat germ based koi food and reduce both the amount fed per day. Switch feeding to afternoons when water might be a little warmer. If there is a sudden drop in water temperature stop feeding for a few days then resume at a reduced amount. Koi do best when fasted for 4-8 weeks during the coldest part of the winter in temperate areas. If most of your koi are small go with a shorter fasting period. Remember how clear your water and how bright your koi looked last winter. Your pond's water and your koi will never be healthier or better than during the winter fasting period. koi colors seem to pop and the water has an extra special sparkle. Another tip is to smell your pond water. Healthy water will smell fresh. Also there should never be any foam or bubbles floating on top of the water. This indicates high organic levels which are unhealthy and stressful to koi.

There are several reasons for these improvements during the cooler times of the year. Some are higher dissolved oxygen levels, reduced waste in the water, clearer water, and better light penetration in your pond. The first two points have to do with healthier water, which translates, to healthier koi. The second two points have to do with color development and color display. Color on koi varies by intensity and hue based on water clarity and sunlight penetration. Move koi into a murky mud pond or indoors for an extended period of time and you might be surprised how quickly their colors can fade. Remember this point as we move through the rest of the year preparing for the show.

Previous spring: Watch your koi very carefully for any signs of parasites or infection as they come out of winter. Also in the spring if your koi spawn they will often scrape themselves and if injuries are allowed to get infected can cause disfiguring scars that can ruin a koi's chances at a show. Net and examine your koi at the first signs of a minor infection. When detected early minor problems can be handled quickly and easily with some topical disinfectant. Also check for parasites if you notice flashing or signs of gill problems. This requires a microscope examination.

I recommend catching some or all of your koi when the water temp hits about 70F. This gives you a chance to look them over carefully for any problems and take care of things when they are minor. Learn to use a microscope to look for parasites. A microscope will cost far less than the cost of using the wrong medications to treat for a parasite you think

you might have but don't.

As your water warms and your filters get back in tune with the growth season be careful not to over feed your koi. Over feeding, over crowding, under filtration/aeration are the biggest contributors to koi health problems and loss of color. DO not increase amount fed faster than your filtration system can handle the extra waste. Increase your water changes and pond/filter maintenance as the water warms into the 70's and into the 80's. Remember what I said about water clarity. If you get green water consider adding a UV unit to your pond system. Most green water is caused by overcrowded and over fed ponds with too much sunlight exposure.

Previous Summer: Feed wheat germ based food. Reduce feeding as temps go over 85F Pay close attention to your water temperature. If it goes over 90F stop feeding or just feed very lightly early every other morning. Be sure to store your food in a cool dry place to prevent spoilage. Insure your oxygen levels are at maximum by increasing aeration. If your water clarity is poor increase water changes and filter maintenance. Consider giving away some of your lesser quality koi if you are over crowded. Some type of shade cover might also be a good idea if your temperature levels rise above the upper 80's. Also some hobbyists swear by using special clay additives to increase the mineral levels in their ponds. I have tried this in the past but felt it wasn't really necessary in our limestone aquifer enriched waters where minerals abound. Feel free to use clay if you wish but it will make it a little harder to keep the water clear.

Two Months before the Show: Increase water changes to maximize your water quality. This may require up to 10% changes daily and occasionally 30-40% changes to accomplish. Remember your wintertime water conditions. You may need to cut way back on feeding or just feed lightly every other day until water gets to be crystal clear then you can bump the feedings back up a little while watching the water clarity and the koi colors.

One Month before the Show: Do 10% changes daily or 25% twice a week. Continue to cut down on feeding with the goal of feeding every other day until the 2nd or 3rd week when you should be feeding every third day. Start thinking about which and how many koi you are going to show and get all your supplies together, bags, oxygen, rubber bands, bag buddies, coolers, nets, tubs, etc. If this is your first time to show consider catching a bagging a few koi with some experienced assistance for some early practice.

One or two weeks before the show: Stop feeding. Continue or even increase water changes to 15% changes daily or 35% twice a week. Look at your koi to determine which to take to the show. Your best chances will be koi with good body shapes, bright clean colors with extra emphasis on white. White color should be snow white to make the other colors really pop. Plan on paper which fish you are going to show and how they will be bagged and boxed together. Put similar size fish together. Small fish will be bruised if boxed with larger fish. In general plan on 1-2 large koi (over 20 in) or 2-3 medium koi (over 12 in) or 4-6 small koi in a bag/cooler together.