

Making A Good Choice For Your Koi Selection

by Grant Fujita,
reprinted from "[KOI](#)"

In the United States, people tend to use "Koi" as a general term. There is a difference between "Koi" and "Nishikigoi." "Koi" (common carp) are found in rivers and lakes. These carp are used as food. "Nishikigoi" are a special breed of carp, which is admired solely for their beauty. Nishikigoi, known as "living jewelry," originated in Niigata. It is this breed of fish that will be discussed although, to conform to general understanding the term "Koi" also will be used in this text to describe "Nishikigoi."

Throughout the years, the breed has been improved and is broken into several categories such as "Kohaku," "Taisho Sanshoku", "Showa-Sanshoku" and many others.

There is no set price for the Nishikigoi. The seller and the buyer decide a price depending upon the knowledge of both. The price also varies according to their size, quality, and condition.

Many times, an expensive Koi will change in the course of its growth and become a worthless one. Likewise an inexpensive Nishikigoi, sometimes, could change into a champion. The knowledge of dealers and Koi keepers determine the future of the fish. Pond environment can change the condition of the Nishikigoi. An expensive and beautiful fish can lose its color in six months because of a poorly conditioned pond. In a pond with a good system, the color will deepen and become beautiful.

QUALITY LEVELS FOR KOI

Pond Quality

Pond quality Koi can be purchased at local pet shops and breeders. Mostly this type of Koi is bred locally with a mixed blood line and no previous record. Often it is not known who did the breeding and most are not suitable for competition. However, they are very inexpensive to buy and enjoyable in the pond.

Ornamental Quality

Ornamental Koi are not bad quality. They may have been bred from good quality parents, have good blood lines, good conformation, and beautiful color. The only difference between ornamental and show quality Koi is the pattern. In most show quality Koi, the very important in addition to the body conformation, Jihada (skin), Kiwa (edge of pattern) and evenness of color. Most ornamental types have an unbalanced pattern with many faults, however, they are very beautiful and can be bought inexpensively. Some may even be used as breeding parents.

Show Quality

There are many requirements to be considered when selecting show quality Koi. They should have:

- Good body conformation.
- Good shiny skin (Utsu-ada).
- Sharp pattern edge (Kiwa).
- Evenness of color in the pattern.
- Overall well balanced patterns.

The experts consider bloodline to be an extremely important element and are sure that most show quality Koi are bred from parents with a good blood line.

The breeding season in Japan runs from April until the early part of June. In the early spring the female can lay 200,000 to 400,000 eggs. The small fry begin to display colors as early as 3 weeks. There is a continual sorting and culling operation during the summertime, in which the Koi that show most promise are separated from the culls. Culls usually are destroyed. Some breeders cook the culls and feed them to the young fish for high protein.

Many very young fry are discarded because their genes have been strongly influenced by their original hereditary color. For example, the Kohaku originated from both white and red colored carp. Many Kohaku fry display single white, red and even dark gray colors.

Selected young Koi are released in a mud pond which is very rich in natural food. Of course they are provided additional food too. They grow rapidly under these conditions until October when they are caught. The first year Koi or "Tosai" are 5 to 6 inches long. They are only 6 months old when they have a chance to see the world, that is, the first time they are netted by the breeder from the mud ponds. "Tategoi" or potential Koi are kept in mud ponds for further growth although some are bought by large wholesale dealers for future investment. The best Tategoi, roughly 500 to 1,000 or more, will stay in the ponds until the following October. Then the best Koi, those that are in excellent condition with good patterns and color for competition, will be sold to the Koi dealer or the individual Koi keeper at an unbelievably high price.

The following year, again in October, the breeders and wholesale dealers drain the mud pond where the "Tosai-Tategoi" have been kept. Those "Tategoi" that are ready with good pattern and color will be sold. The young potential fish that are not ready but have a good pattern will be returned to the mud ponds for another year. The rest of the Koi that are not considered in the Tategoi category anymore because of undesirable pattern or color, will be sold at auction.

Many Koi keepers think that "Tategoi" means only small Koi, but for the dealer "Tategoi" means Koi of any size, from three inches to more than thirty inches, that have potential to become beautiful in the future. Each Koi has a different quality, personality, and character and each will grow to a different size. One could become beautiful, another

worthless and others could attain top condition when they are only six inches in size. Alternatively, others only achieve top condition when they grow to about thirty inches. Although a dealer may have many years of experience and the best knowledge, when he picks more than a thousand "Tosai-Tategoi," he realizes only a few percent will reach his expectations.

Many Koi keepers ask the question "Why is Nishikigoi so expensive?" Being fully aware of the many problems that face the breeders, wholesalers and dealers, the dedicated hard work spread out over several years plus the costs involved it is understandable why Show quality Koi are expensive.

Each Koi has different possibilities, size, and quality. A Koi which achieves its best condition while still small will not, usually, maintain this quality as it grows. Some of you may have experienced owning a small Koi, a winner in competition, that later on has started to lose pattern and color. In past Koi competitions in Japan as well as in the United States, a small Koi (under 10 inches) that has won a high prize usually will not maintain the same condition and win another high prize when it becomes larger (more than 28 inches). On the other hand, if a large Koi (more than 26 inches) becomes beautiful and in top condition it will normally keep the same condition for a long time, unless placed in a bad environment. In the past, in Japan, some of the large Koi, (more than 30 inches), that took Grand Champion in the All Japan Koi Competition have come back the next year to win Grand Champion again. Maybe this next time they are entered in a larger size category or under a new owner's name.

As a Koi keeper, you need to decide what level of Koi quality you are looking for i.e.. pond quality, ornamental quality, or show quality. Show quality can be very expensive, however, if not interested in Koi competitions, you do not have to spend a lot of money to enjoy beautiful fish. Do not expect to get show quality pattern with pond type of fish. If you are thinking about competing in a Koi show, you must consider an entirely different selection process. All show quality Nishikigoi are not expensive, but most are.

First determine the amount of money you would like to spend. Many Koi keepers do not want to spend much, but want the very best and this is almost impossible. However, if the Koi you select is not polished or in the best color condition, it will not be as expensive as one that is polished. With a well maintained pond and a good filter system, it is possible you could improve and polish a good quality Koi. Normally, small Koi are less expensive than large ones but, sometimes, polished small Koi are more expensive than unpolished large. Some knowledge regarding potential is required when buying small Koi because they will change drastically during a six month period. If you can predict the changes in a small Koi within 6 months to a year, then you must be very good at selection.

Very often good quality, medium to large Koi that have not been polished, or have been damaged by either bad water conditions or excessive transportation will be sold for a reduced price. By putting them into a good pond environment with a good filter system this type of Koi could be improved.

Unless the intention is to enter the fish in a competition immediately it is not wise to purchase a polished small Koi at a high price. The Koi keepers in Japan say, "The person who buys expensive "Tosai" is a fool and the dealer who sells expensive "Tosai" is also a fool." The only way to acquire the skills to pick small Koi for the future is to buy many small ones and watch how they change. Observe how pattern and colors change with body growth. For example: if the size of the red pattern does not keep up with the growth of the body then, later; the red pattern will be diminished by the body. On the other hand, be aware of the size of the black pattern, most of the time, will increase when the Koi gets bigger.

In conclusion, if you are looking for inexpensive show quality Nishikigoi, learn as much as you can by getting active in organizations such as Koi clubs. In addition, attend as many Koi shows as possible, learn how and why the judges make their decisions, most judges do not mind if you ask questions. Some Koi keepers will tell you that the only way to learn is to make mistakes first. This maybe true but don't make too many costly mistakes. One of the best ways to learn about Nishikigoi is to visit and talk to people who are knowledgeable. Another is to take pictures when you purchase your Koi then, if it is small, take pictures every month until it reaches top condition and you will see the changes. Medium and large Koi don't usually change as much as small ones, so take the pictures every three to six months. Of course, each Koi will grow differently, but certain categories such as Kohaku, Taisho-Sanshoku, Showa-Sanshoku change in a similar way.

Be sure to put the date and your comments on the pictures each time you take them.