



The mud pond has many virtues and is the ideal environment for raising koi

About the author:



Mike Snaden is the proprietor of Yume Koi in Bristol, specialising solely in very high end koi. He has supplied three out of the last four BKKS Grand Champions. Mike's specialised field is water and growing koi to their maximum potential, as a Japanese breeder would. This approach has given him considerable insight into koi.

The Mystique of the Mud Pond

Mud ponds are considered to have miraculous properties, some might say of biblical proportions. In this, the first of a series of articles, Mike Snaden clears the smoke from our eyes and gives us the real reasons for their success in raising nishikigoji...

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Keeping koi is one of most fascinating hobbies and in many respects is a form of gambling, full of risks. Theoretically, the higher the stake the better the chances of winning. However, this really isn't the case. In many respects, the higher the stakes, the more we will lose. My feelings are that people just don't recognise that they have lost. This may sound confusing, so I'll elaborate...

Most breeders will tend to try and sell their best koi to Japanese customers. There

are several reasons for this, the main one being that if the koi is in Japan the breeder still has a hand in its fate. A koi which has left the country can't become grand champion in Japan! Also, breeders like to keep their options open in respect of the fact that if the koi grows up well, he will hopefully have the chance to buy it back from the customer for breeding, should he so desire.

Takeda-san

The late Takeda-san was one of my major koi



As nisai (two years old), this Kohaku was imported into the UK at 55cm



At six years of age in May 2007, this koi was raised in the UK to 85cm

mentors and was very much of this opinion. Last year I was allowed to choose five koi from all his tategoi (a koi possessing potential for the future) tosa (a koi in its first year of life, up to the age of one year old). The reason why he was willing to sell me these koi was results. He had confidence that I would only let them go to ponds that I was certain could do them as much justice as he himself.

the habitat

Nowadays, we live in a hobby driven by industry, so much so that I feel we lose sight of the obvious and of simplicity. The vast majority of hobbyists think only of the water and quite rightly so! The old adage of 'if you look after the water, the koi will look after itself' is still very true. However, I find it disappointing that we have a tendency to concentrate on the water's appearance and parameters, rather than what might actually be good for koi.

In this day and age, we are often fooled into thinking that the latest gadget for clear water or the latest water additives are the answers to all our prayers. The trouble is though, this is often done at the expense of the koi's ideal habitat.

understanding tategoi

In a recent conversation with Takigawa-san, we were talking about understanding tategoi and he complimented my eye. I told him that I bought and grew many koi and that these koi were my teachers. You see, the trouble is that with koi we are far too impatient. In some respects we expect too much from koi and in other ways we expect

too little. The Japanese generally feel that there is a big likeness between koi and bonsai. They feel that Westerners are too impatient in that we expect koi to finish too soon, giving up quickly on a koi, only to sell it and buy one with lesser prospects to replace it. In truth, koi need time and patience. In order to get a good product in the long run, we need to keep it looking youthful or unfinished.

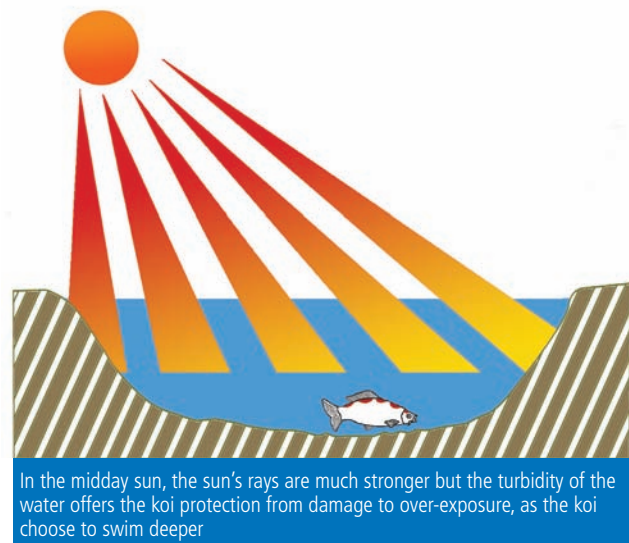
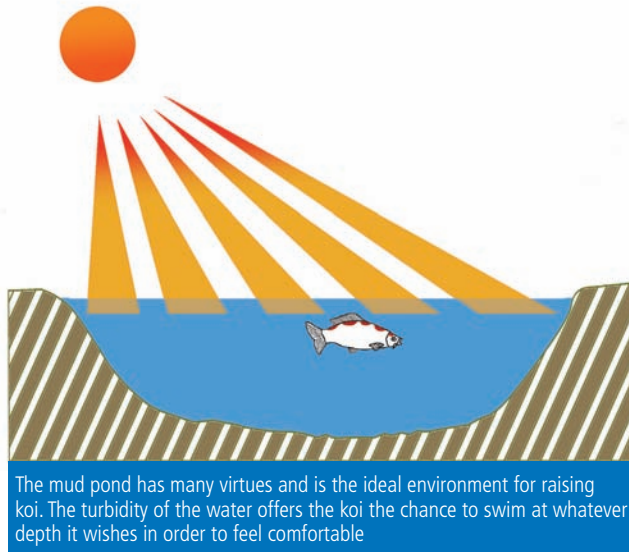
As with bonsai, koi can often need a little maintenance. How many champion koi in Japan do you really think achieved their accolade without once seeing the breeder's scalpel? How many bonsai trees grew up to be something really impressive without annual maintenance?

Westerners

The Westerner's biggest failing is that they don't look at how the koi are raised in Japan. Instead they worry about how good the water looks and how easy it is to see the koi in all their glory. There's nothing wrong with that per se, but this approach is more often than not our first major downfall when we try to raise koi. So, with no further ado, let's swing things around to see how koi are raised in Japan.

Most people go to Japan for the first time and compare their ponds to those of the breeder. It is highly likely that you would feel that your pond were far superior. Although this would make you feel good inside its kind of missing the point. You see, a breeder's indoor ponds are generally used just for keeping koi alive during the winter months. Sure, most breeders nowadays raise tosa in these ponds through the winter, but

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You really have to think of a koi's colour as a living entity in its own right, a little like anemones in a marine aquarium

this is really just so that they can be grown big enough to sex before the best are placed into the mud pond the following spring.

the natural way

When we go to Japan, it is the mud ponds we should be looking at and the water within them, as this is the koi's natural growing environment, if there is such a thing.

People generally think that the magic of the mud pond lies in its mineral rich water, created by the mineral rich clay of the pond. This simply couldn't be further from the truth. Almost the entirety of Japan has soil and rock that is devoid of minerals. By minerals, I mean anything that can be taken into solution like calcium and magnesium, hence raising water hardness.

Niigata is the area with pretty much the lowest mineral levels in the ground and, hence, about the only thing that can be farmed there is rice, as nothing else will grow. Niigata is frequently in the newspapers as farmers are struggling so much because of this. We'll cover water in more depth in a follow up to this though.

turbidity and sunlight

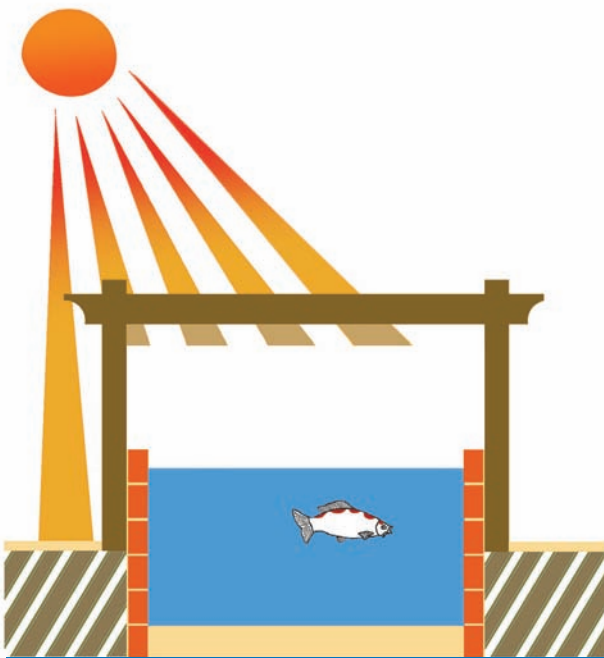
To my mind, one of the best secrets of the mud pond lies in the water's turbidity. In Japan the summers are very hot, with much sunshine. Daytime air temperatures often reach 40°C and the water

temperatures in the mud ponds frequently exceed 30°C. I went to Japan in March for 12 days and experienced daytime temperatures of 18-20°C, coming back with a peeling neck!

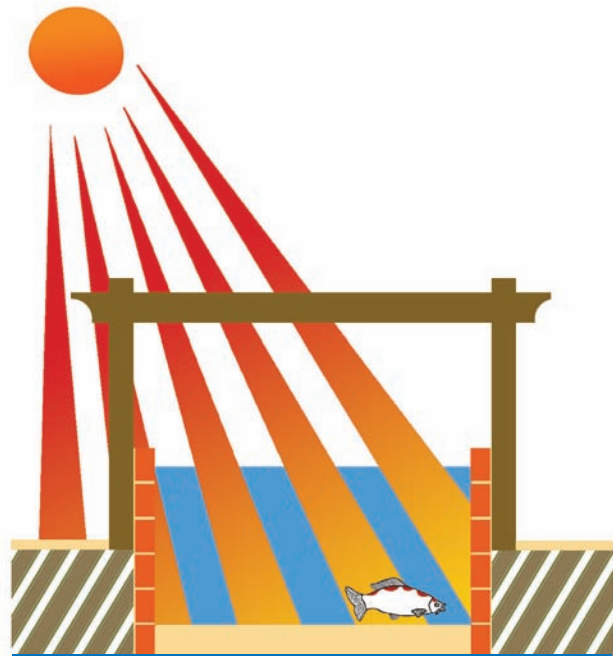
Although mud ponds are usually fed by solar powered feeders this is not done in the same way as we feed our koi. The reason for this is that during the height of a summer's day the koi simply won't come up for food. In the morning, ambient temperatures are cooler and the sunlight less intense. The koi will be seen at the surface and will readily take floating food. However, during the height of the day the temperature is higher and the sun much more intense, and therefore the koi will be nowhere to be seen.

The wise amongst us humans will lie on a beach wearing sun block when the weather is hot. Koi however don't have such luxuries, so will instead swim deeper in the mud pond. Near dusk, when the sun starts to drop, they will be seen nearer the surface and will happily take floating food once more. This isn't to say that koi don't feed during the hotter part of the day, as they will more likely forage around in the mud, looking for natural foods.

In short, my opinion is that koi are a lot smarter than we think and know when they are in danger from the sun. They use the mud pond's murky water as a sun blocking filter and will swim at whatever depth they feel comfortable in. ▶



On a typical British day, the lesser amount of sunlight is almost stopped by the shading over the pond, leading to fading colours



On a sunny British day, the shading offers some protection for the koi from too much exposure. However, the crystal clear water offers very little light filtering, so the koi can still become damaged by the sun's rays



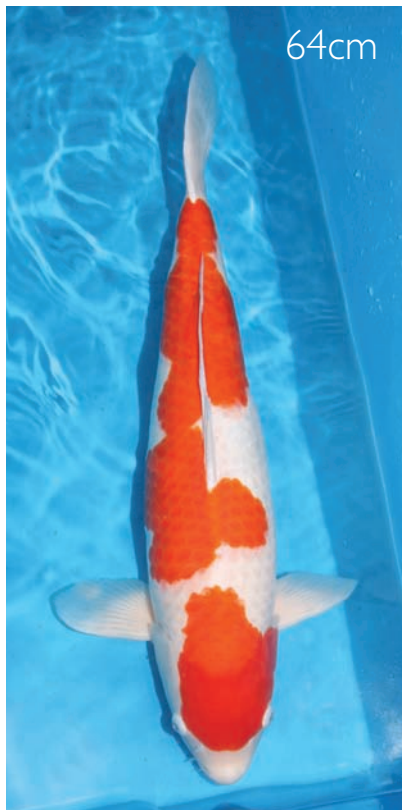
For several years, I had people coming here offering advice on how to clean up the water in our 4400 gallon pond, affectionately known as 'The Cesspit'. Running a pond with turbid water and no UV can yield wonderful results. But, when using this method to offer 'variable light filtration' for the koi, you will also need to supplement the daylight. Otherwise, the koi won't get enough light to keep their colour and skin in top condition. If koi are being grown at warmer temperatures you need to take into account that they will also need a sufficient amount of light relative to the temperature, otherwise colours will fade

A koi that is finished too soon will run downhill too soon, just like a once beautiful lady that spent too many of her younger years on a beach in Spain with not enough sun block



53cm

This koi was imported in November 2006 at 53cm. In the first picture you can see a little weakness in the *teri* (the shine of the skin) in the tail tube area and the *kiwa* (sharpness of the rearward edges of the pattern) on the shoulder, which is something that is usually only fixed up using the mud pond



64cm

As *sansai* (three years old), you can see that as well as growing to 64cm in our somewhat 'murky' 4400 gallon pond, the colour condition is much more attractive, with much improvement in the *teri*. This koi should grow to around 72cm by the time she is four years old. If her condition improves in the manner that it has done so far, she will become much more treasured. However, if she were raised from *nisai* through to *yonsai* (four years old) in a pond with crystal clear water, she would most likely have already peaked by now and her condition would already be on the decline. As *yonsai*, it is feasible that she could then be worth nothing

a living entity in its own right, a little like anemones in a marine aquarium. It's probably easier to liken a koi's colour to a lawn though... A healthy lawn will be a rich vivid green. Too much sun in a heat wave will burn it, yet where the lawn is shaded by a big dense tree it will die off because of lack of light. A koi's colour is exactly the same!

aim high

This now comes back to the compliment paid by Takigawa-san... If you set your sights higher when it comes to raising a koi to its best possible potential, you learn so much more from them. You learn the effects of *beni* (red) that is too hard or too soft and the effects of the latter, with too much *sashi* (blurry line between the front of a *hi* or *sumi* plate and the *shiroji*) etc.

My thoughts are that if the koi has the potential to grow to 85cm and is of the highest quality and the breeder has priced it as such, then we should try to achieve the same, if not better, results as the breeder himself. Anything less would be doing the breeder an injustice.

my set-up

On my premises I have a pond of 4400 gallons. For several years I have been raising all my best koi in this pond, with murky water and supplemental metal halide lighting. For years, I have had people coming here advising me what to do to make the water clearer. Nowadays, people realise the magic qualities of this pond. The colour quality, thickness and softness are of a level that is pretty much unequalled. You could argue that if I had clearer water, I could turn off the metal halide light. However, doing so would mean that the pond would fall into the scenario of having too much sun one day and not enough the next.

postponing the finished product

It doesn't matter to me if people can see the koi or not as when someone comes here I can easily pull up and bowl any koi. It's at this point that they come into their own! Sure, these koi may not look ready for a koi show, but in a few years time their colour will be so much nicer for it.

The best colour quality is one that is postponed from finishing until the koi is big. A koi that is finished too soon will run downhill too soon, just like a once beautiful lady that spent too many of her younger years on a beach in Spain with not enough sun block... think about it. 鯉

shading

In our man-made filtered ponds containing pristine water, we often think about whether the pond is getting the right amount of sun. You will often see a hobbyist's pond with a pergola over it, usually with shading fitted. This is a good move if your pond catches all day sun. In this instance, it is best to shade the midday and afternoon sun as the ambient temperature will be higher and the sun stronger, and therefore more dangerous.

The trouble is that this is still a heavy compromise. This practice may work well in the height of a heat wave, but on days with lesser sunlight the shading prevents the colour cells from getting enough light to thrive.

a living entity in itself

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