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# A fish fetish



Photo by Joel Koyama, Star Tribune

Collector Ron Sterbenz has 16 koi fish, all purchased in Japan.

A carp is a carp -- unless it's a high-bred ornamental koi fish. Connoisseurs pay big bucks for the showiest specimens and build elaborate back-yard habitats where their "living art" can thrive.

By [Kim Palmer](#), Star Tribune

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## KOI SHOW

**What:** Upper Midwest Koi Club Koi Show, featuring fine-quality fish, a product expo and seminars on koi care and related topics. (For the seminar schedule, visit [www.umkoiclub.org/koishow.htm](http://www.umkoiclub.org/koishow.htm).)

**When:** 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.- 3 p.m. Sunday.

**Where:** Bachman's Garden Center, 6010 Lyndale Av. S., Minneapolis.

**Tickets:** Free admission.

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Carp, the bottom-feeders of the aquatic world, are sometimes called "rough fish." But that hardly describes the refined beauties swimming in Dick Hadley's pond overlooking Prior Lake.

This is no random school of river fish, but a prized collection of ornamental carp, or koi, as carefully bred and selected as Hadley's two poodles. He traveled all the way to Japan to find one of his newest, a pure white Tancho Kohaku with a persimmon red spot on its head. Together, his fish form a shimmering, living kaleidoscope that Hadley never tires of looking at.

"I love the endless varieties," he said. "I like to come out here with a cup of coffee in the morning or a beer at night, feed them and watch the water and movement. I find it very relaxing."

This week, Hadley will bring a few of his finest fish to the Twin Cities' first koi show, where their appearance -- size, shape, skin quality and other details -- will be scrutinized like Miss America contestants.

How does he think his fish will fare in the judging? His olive-green Chagoi might do well, he mused. "It has nice size." His Tancho Kohaku's prospects will be dimmed by a small sore that mars its otherwise glistening perfection. He's partial to his Shiro Utsuri, a striking fish with wide, crisp bands of black and white encircling its shapely body, but he doesn't expect it to win its category.

"Sue will undoubtedly have a bigger, better one," he said.

He's probably right. Sue Emerick's Shiro, which she has named Panda, just snagged Grand Champion at the koi show in Indianapolis last month.

What's so special about Panda? She's large, about 30 inches long, Emerick said, and her white patches have the pearlescent look favored by judges. Her preshow beauty regimen includes a color-enhancing diet rich in silkworms, plus mineral clay added to her water. "If I've got my whites in good shape, the other colors always look great," Emerick said.

Their fish are rivals, but Emerick and Hadley are cooperative members of the Upper Midwest Koi Club, which is hosting this week's show. Emerick, the club president, is even bringing her oxygen bottle over to Hadley's place to help him bag his fish.

## Pricey pets

Emerick's koi have netted their share of ribbons, but that's not what she loves most about competing, she said. "It's an opportunity to meet some of the most learned people in the country. Of all the activities I've done, koi people are the best."

They're also among the most affluent. While "pond-quality" koi sell for as little as \$15, show-quality fish often cost hundreds, even thousands of dollars, while the finest koi can fetch five-digit figures.

At those prices, are they pets or acquisitions? Pets, their owners say. Unlike goldfish, which tend to dart away from human contact, koi are curious and friendly.

"They'll eat out of your hands," said Ron Sterbenz of Minneapolis, cofounder of the club. "If you go in the pond, they'll swim around you."


And unlike marine fish, which can be territorial and aggressive, koi are egalitarian, Hadley said. "You can put a new fish in, or a goldfish, and they don't care. They're social creatures. One fish alone in a tank will sulk."

Koi are highly interactive, agreed Dr. Amy Kizer of Southview Animal Hospital in Inver Grove Heights, the local koi community's go-to veterinarian. She treats sick fish, does surgery to remove tumors or suture lacerated fins and even performs necropsies to determine cause of death. And, yes, she makes house calls.

"I'll examine fish at the clinic, but with koi, I prefer to go to the pond. It helps me understand the fish's health," she said. "These people invest a lot in their ponds and their fish, so they're willing to pay someone to come out."

### **Not just a pretty pond**

Creating and maintaining an optimal koi environment is very different from merely installing a pretty pond, owners note. Water quality is essential to koi health, so ponds must have good filtration and water-circulation systems. The water in Sterbenz's 5,000-gallon pond, for example, turns over every 25 minutes. He has two circuits, two filters and two pumps, as backup. Hadley's pond has three kinds of filtration: mechanical, biological and ultraviolet.

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**Joel Koyama**, Star Tribune

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The ponds must be at least 4 feet deep (probably deeper in Minnesota because of the temperature extremes), with straight vertical sides so that predators, such as raccoons and herons, can't wade in. And rocky bottoms are frowned upon by club members, who say they collect debris, create pockets of poor-quality water and injure fish' mouths.

Many koi aficionados get their first fish to complement their water garden, but soon discover that keeping healthy koi requires specialized knowledge. Koi beginners often end up completely redoing their ponds after they start losing fish.

The local club's founding members first met through the Water Garden Society, but decided to form their own club last year. "We wanted to focus on the fish," Sterbenz said.

There are 35 clubs registered with the Associated Koi Clubs of America (AKCA), up from just over 20 about 10 years ago, according to Steve Childers, editor of Koi USA magazine.

Koi collecting is a well-established hobby on the coasts, but it's been slower to take off in Minnesota, in part because of the challenge of over-wintering fish, according to Childers. (Some local koi keepers move their fish to indoor tanks for the winter, while others keep them outdoors in a hibernated state.)

"Minnesota is a young, green market," said Mike Swanson, co-owner of Koi Acres in Scandia, Minn., which sells fish and supplies, installs ponds and organizes buying trips to Japan. "When we started out four years ago, people didn't know what koi were. They'd come up to us at the Home & Garden show and ask, 'What are they?' 'Can I eat them?' 'Can I fish for them?' This year, it was, 'Wow! Those are beautiful fish.' It's gone from relative obscurity to people appreciating quality."

One unfortunate byproduct of koi's rising popularity was the theft last year of about 150 koi from a display pond at Scenic Specialties and the Pond Shop in St. Joseph, Minn. The purloined koi were inexpensive, pond-quality fish, said owner Randy Schmitz, but they had sentimental value.

"The ones in the display tank are not for sale; they're our pets, part of our family," he said. Two of them, Madame Butterfly and Kingfish, had been at the store since it first opened. "They were our pond mascots."

Deep attachment to koi is common, according to Kizer. Most of her patients have names, and the most expensive procedure she's performed, a \$500 surgery, wasn't done on a valuable show koi, but on an inexpensive but beloved koi. "These fish have personalities," she said.

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