

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

MARK NUTTALL

Mark Nuttall, publisher of *Koi Carp* magazine, has been a keen koi keeper for over 20 years. He is driven by his sheer passion for the hobby.



After years of prejudice it was time to visit Israel and experience first hand what was on offer.

At 72 Colin Wilcox is still going strong regularly leading trips out to the Israeli breeders.



With the lagoon netted this is the first chance the dealer has to get up close and see what this year's harvest brings.



Bill Knibbs has a keen eye for what his customers look for in koi. "My customers are looking for good quality koi so to select the best from Israel you need to get the waders on."

Incredibly I have never really felt the need to visit Israel. Blissfully happy in my ignorance, I had built up some preconceptions like it being far too hot and dusty. I thought the kibbutz system was for drug smoking hippies and the TV often reminds me of the ongoing troubles in the region! Israel was not for me.

Then I was reading this magazine feature about the contributions Israel has made to the world in many areas including medicine, chemistry, economics, physics and literature. I was amazed to learn Israel is a powerhouse of ideas and innovation and I was intrigued to discover more. Could my preconceived ideas of Israel be wrong?

For the first time in my koi career, which spans over 20 years, I wanted to experience for myself what Israel had to offer the koi keeper.

Above all else, perhaps what they have done best is take these ideas and innovations on to run successful businesses. On the plane coming back from my second visit to Israel I sat in the middle of two Israeli gentlemen – an elderly modern gentleman and an Orthodox Jew. Both were in business for themselves. One owned a business that bought large plots of countryside and grew trees that can be adopted. The Orthodox Jew owned a chain of laundrettes – well, two actually. As we got to know each other and chatted, it became clear to me that business is the Israeli preoccupation. Business is something they are passionate about and they're very good at it.

During my time in Israel I learnt that breeding koi does not come from a deep rooted passion to breed Grand Champions, or to produce one-off works of art sold for princely sums. It comes from years of experience in producing food fish by the kilo. Israel produces millions of tons per annum and it's a fascinating story in itself. Their knowhow was then transferred to ornamental fish, and for 25 years plus they have been perfecting the craft. They are true innovators pushing fish husbandry to new levels.

Breeding ornamental fish has been bolted on as a side line because it made business sense to do so. Israel is a fish factory on a grand scale and a very good one at that. Giant food hoppers at the side of the lagoons are testimony to the large numbers of koi that live in the growing on ponds, literally millions of koi – 40kg of food fired into the lake in seconds and the water boils. Flashes of colour reveal the

identity of the fish. The hatcheries are huge, with row after row of specialist transparent conical flasks used for hatching the larvae. The sheer volume of everything is unlike anything I have ever seen in the koi world.

Initial disappointment

The first time I visited I was deeply disappointed. It was contrary to almost everything I had experienced to date and a complete contrast to my visits to Japan and Purdin Koi Farm in the USA. Scott Purdin is passionate about the koi even, dare I say it, over the business of selling them. There are koi Scott has bred I doubt he will ever sell at any price. That is certainly true from the Japanese koi breeders too. Koi is in their blood, coursing through the veins. I once saw genuine tears from one Japanese breeder when he sold one of his prized koi.

Where was the mystery, the history, the secret ponds and the tales of blood lineages?

Then the penny dropped. The Israeli breeders are to koi keeping what Ford are to the motor industry. From that point onwards it all made sense. They may not have an F1 racing team but, for now at least, that's not what they are about.

Israel is turning koi keeping into a global business accessible to millions of potential koi keepers and that has to be good news for the hobby – 70% of all koi imported into the UK probably come from Israel. Israel imports more koi to the UK than from anywhere else in the world by a long way.

As a business, they quickly recognised their market as predominantly 'garden centre koi'. Koi that will more than likely share their homes with goldfish, comets and probably a few frogs and newts as well. Israeli koi dominate this market.

What Israel does have is to die for – average year-round temperatures perfect for breeding koi and growing them on fast. This, together with an unlimited supply of clean spring fed freshwater, means that if you were to stick pins anywhere on a map of the world to set up a koi production and breeding facility, Israel would certainly be one of them. It ticks all the boxes necessary to efficiently breed and grow on koi. Together with its proximity to the UK and Europe, it's easy to see why Israeli koi are more affordable and have become so popular in the last decade.

Huge Lagoons hold millions of tons of fresh, warm water where egrets, herons and cormorants thrive. It's impossible to keep them out even with lines and nets and they feed at will on the koi. Mongoose slide between the vats and tanks of koi, stealing their next meal at every opportunity. What they take is tiny in comparison to what is produced and a never ending saga for the breeders.

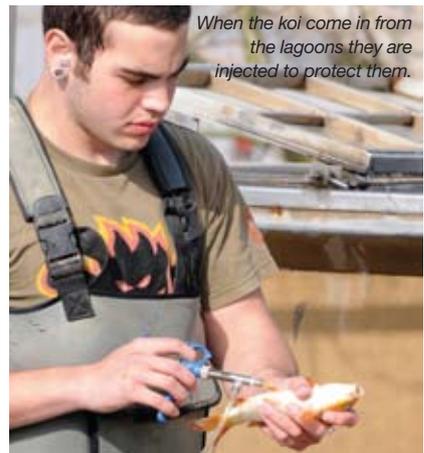
Tried and tested

Preparing the koi for export is a well tried and tested method. Baskets of purchased fish are cooled down to 4°C to slow down the metabolism of the koi and reduce their stress levels ready for export. Leaving the breeder to arriving at the dealer is planned to be less than 24 hours. Fatalities and serious stress are now rare, the relatively short travel time reduces stress further.

My two visits to Israel were dealer buying trips, which gives me a great insight into the business world of buying koi for resale, but because of the hectic schedules of back to back meetings there is never enough time to really get to know the people behind the farms. Gil is responsible



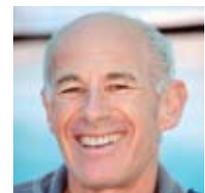
Selected koi being cooled ready for transportation.



When the koi come in from the lagoons they are injected to protect them.



Eytan Hazan, Dag Noy.



Mavorot.



Dotan, Madan Koi Farm.



Gil, Madan Koi Farm.



The arduous job of moving the koi to the concrete ponds begins.



Factory style food feeders, a clue to the number of koi in each lagoon.



First cull of the 2012 Showa spawning.

Gil is in charge of the breeding program at Madan and heads the team responsible for improving the quality.



for the breeding program at Madan Koi, selecting the parent stock from Japan and matching parents each year. In recent years Madan have made a commitment to improving further the quality of their koi and, indeed, the quality of koi that are being bred in Israel is improving every year. That's not a throw away comment - I saw stunning Hariwake, Kujaku, Ochiba, Purachina and metallic koi.

The only koi LE Koi were interested in was the top two grades. Basically you can hand pick or choose a number of koi from a certain vat. I watched as Bill from LE Koi handpicked his koi. Experienced in buying koi from Japan and Israel, Bill's eye is tuned into what his customers like, and he selects his koi based on his years of experience and knowing what sells and what doesn't.

These are not koi that would win competitions but, as Bill says: "My customers are looking for quality and good value. Israel has come up with the perfect product for this market. They are not looking for show winners, just big, quality, colourful koi."

I reckon there are probably less than 300 koi keepers that have shown their koi in competitions in the UK over the last three years. That's a tiny number compared to the tens of thousands that buy koi for their own back garden enjoyment.

John Cook from Shirley Aquatics summed it up 15 years ago: "Koi in Japan are graded by their quality regardless of size. In Israel they are graded by their size, so the dealer can use their expertise to select the better quality koi for their customers." Although things have changed in 15 years and the relative quality is significantly better, this is essentially still true today. The koi dealer with a good eye can purchase great looking koi.

Secret ponds

Like a good professional photographer preparing his work for an exhibition, we will never see the hundreds or even thousands of photographs taken that never quite made the grade because the contrast was not quite right or the composition was not perfect. They will never see the light of day but serve only to remind the photographer of the errors.

I feel like the Japanese breeders are experts at doing the same. Their exhibition is the show pond or, my favourite, the secret pond that no one ever knows about and even fewer are privileged to see! I am a sucker for that one because I want to believe



it – it adds to the story! In these ‘secret ponds’ you will see the breeder’s lifelong work, the result of decades of experience and learning about these living jewels.

As I walked around the vats in Israel and was shown around the facilities I was hoping for that tap on the shoulder and a whisper from the breeder: “Not everyone gets to see these but let us show you what we are working on for the future.” Unfortunately it never came but, in truth, this is not what Israeli koi breeding is about. It’s about serving the mass market and, as said previously, this is something they do incredibly well.

Strong and healthy

Madan are the innovators in the koi breeding market place and have made massive advances in koi health and koi production over the years. All Madan koi are now immunised against KHV and are proven to be very strong, healthy koi.

Statistically the facts speak for themselves. The sheer numbers of koi imported into Europe compared to the number of serious outbreaks of serious fish disease are miniscule by comparison. Of course, anyone that has had the bad luck to experience a pond wipeout will be difficult to console, but statistically the chances are it won’t be as a result of an immunised koi. Shirley Aquatics, LE Koi and Cascade Water Gardens all sell both Japanese and immunised koi and claim that they experience fewer health problems with the Israeli fish they sell.

Every year Israel continues to improve the koi varieties and now produce excellent Ghost koi, Utsuri, Koromo, Chagoi, Ochiba Shigure, Ginrin and metallic koi of all varieties. I watched as Bill chose half a dozen beautiful Hariwakes, with vibrant deep yellow colouring that would shine out in any garden pond. As I stared into the bowl I had to ask myself – would these koi take pride of place in 90% of all koi keepers’ ponds? They most definitely would.

Trade Only Buying Trips

Colin Wilcox from UK Pond Products Ltd organises trade only trips to buy koi from Israeli breeders. He has been guiding British dealers for over 25 years and has watched the industry change and develop. Colin, at 72, is still actively escorting dealers on their trips to Israel. Colin also buys and stocks a range of koi at his base in Staffordshire so that dealers can select koi in the UK without the need to fly to Israel. For more information telephone 01889 579055.