

Japan's Koi Harvest

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Every autumn, Japanese koi farms begin the year's annual harvest, with the results closely observed by koi dealers and enthusiasts around the world. These observers eagerly wait to see whether or not the year's koi crop might yield a future champion. Koi farmers harvest this year's crop from a mud pond. (Courtesy of Kodama Koi Farm) At harvest, koi breeders cull the stock of those with undesirable qualities. (Courtesy of Kodama Koi Farm) A 4-month-old goshiki at harvest time (Courtesy of Brady Brandwood/Lotus Land Koi Farm)

Taro Kodama, president of Kodama Koi Farm in Mililani, Hawaii, an importer of Japanese koi, said the health and quality of koi coming out of Japan this past fall looked similar to past years. "Because it was a cold summer, [however,] some breeders were not as successful in the harvest as the others," he said. "Last year, as the summer was good, everybody's harvest was good."

The recession also affected koi production in Japan, Kodama said. "The order from Europe decreased, so the breeders produced less tosaï (babies)," he said. "[Breeders] were more selective or picky in terms of quality. The production was about 30 percent down, but the quality went up about 30 percent."

Katsumi Fukushima of Niigata Nishikigoi Breeders Corp. in Niigata, Japan, said Niigata koi farmers initially expressed concern that a cool summer with heavy rains would not bode well for the region's koi crop. In the end, however, he said the harvest proved successful.

In terms of koi varieties, Fukushima said no new ones stood out in the harvest. His crop of 40,000 fish showed strength regarding midorigoi, shiro utsuri, kohaku, gin rin kohaku, sanke and kujyaku.

Despite the economic downturn, Mike Swanson, owner of Koi Acres in Scandia, Minn., said demand for imported koi among his customers remained high. Because he nearly sold out of fish last year, Swanson said he expected to purchase more fish this year during his annual koi pilgrimage to Japan.

Swanson said about a dozen customers plan to join him on his koi-hunting trip. He said some customers expressed very particular interests, including at least three exclusively seeking goshiki.

Craig Mariani, owner of Butterfly Koi in Ludlow, Mass., also named goshiki as a hot item coming out of this fall's koi harvest. He said his koi dealer, who recently returned from a koi trip to Japan, expressed pleasure with the goshiki coming out of the country, as well as the quality of kohaku produced.

Joe Pawlak, president of Blackwater Creek Koi Farms Inc. in Eustis, Fla., said when discussing koi markets abroad, one must consider the economy. "The yen is now 89 per dollar," he said. "Back when we used to import fish from Japan, we were getting as high as 140 yen to the dollar — that's almost a 40 percent difference and more than the net profit we ever made on imports."

Export represents a major part of Japan's koi market. When the exchange rate shifts this way, buyers must pay more for fish or farmers must sell koi for a lower price, Pawlak said. "With that said, a lower price has meant closure of business for some and economic impacts for all," he said.

Kodama also said the weak dollar (and comparatively strong Japanese yen) will affect this year's koi market. "The market price of koi in Japan is not changing, so the koi price will go up definitely," he said. The question, according to Kodama, is how much importers prove willing to absorb the increase that determines the final market price for koi in the United States.

After making an October koi trip to Japan, Joel Burkard, president of Pan Intercorp in Kenmore, Wash., said Japanese koi demand remained strong. "Any hopes for reduced prices due to a lack of demand are unrealistic," he said.

Burkard also said the Hiroshima area experienced a particularly good year for koi, yielding plenty of high-quality inventories. "The Niigata area did alright as well, though not as good as Hiroshima in terms of its new crop," he said. "The region had a slightly lower yield than usual, but overall, we're pretty much on course for this spring's koi season in the United States."