

Novice, Mid-level Koi Collectors Help Retailers Weather the Economy

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The heady days of big fish, big ponds and big profits might be a memory for now, but retailers specializing in koi and luxury backyard ponds and water gardens reported a steady stream of trade from novice and mid-level customers that is keeping many koi businesses afloat. Pond and water garden retailers reported steady sales from novice and mid-level koi customers. (Courtesy of Asahi Fancy Koi/Cioli & Hunnicutt/ BowTie Media) Pond and water garden retailers said energy-saving pumps, attentive service to maintenance contracts and higher quality foods are creating a mini-windfall.

"People are not doing a lot of new ponds," said Shawn McHenry, owner of Mystic Koi & Water Gardens in Upland, Calif. "People who already have ponds, [however] are taking better care of them."

Efficient pumps and a push toward higher quality foods are part of the business plan for Barbara D. Johnson, owner and founder of The Fish Lady in Van Nuys, Calif. "The economy is not out of the woods," Johnson said. With the exception of the occasional Hollywood client who wants things like blue lobsters scuttling around a pond, Johnson said most of her customers hesitate to sink much money into fish.

Johnson said pocketbook incentives continue to prod pond owners to invest in energy-saving, environmentally friendly pumps. Installing the pumps provide a business boost to her maintenance operation, for which Johnson employs eight full-time employees.

"We are using pool pumps that can have thousands of different speeds and regulate anything you want," Johnson said. "I have it on my pond and many of my clients do, too. The pumps are fairly expensive -- they range from \$900 to \$1,300 -- but they can save \$250 per month just on power." Johnson, who's been in the koi industry for 25 years, said she also sees more koi owners buy better food.

At Mystic Koi McHenry said he also sells more high quality foods, a trend he attributed to the economy. "I get customers who come in and ask about food, and I'll say, 'Here's the best, it's what we use,'" McHenry said. "If price is a concern say, 'Here's another option.' Nine times out of 10 they end up buying the more expensive food."

When pond and water garden customers do buy fish, they downsize, McHenry said. Customers who used to purchase a single \$1,000 or \$2,000 fish a year or two ago now opt for one or two fish in the \$300 range, he said.

McHenry said he also brought in a large batch of tosai koi less than a year old and sold them for \$25 each. While profitable, McHenry said he misses the high-end clients. Still, McHenry said, the little fish will grow and compared it to the practice among gardeners who buy smaller plants and nurture them to maturity.

"The hobby's growing a lot," McHenry said. "Some of the products are more professional than they were. The koi community seems a little bit more educated."

Product sales and a spit-spot approach to maintenance jobs proved successful for AQUADOC Lake & Pond Management in Chardon, Ohio, said owner John Wilson. Koi sales remained tame, but customers make upgrades to boost pond enjoyment or ease of care, such as improved pumps and filters, Wilson said. To capitalize on that trend, AQUADOC's new catalog grew to 140 pages, double last-year's version.

"People are staying home," Wilson said. "They want to sit by their ponds and enjoy them."