

The purpose of this column is to provide MAKC members with an up-close and personal introduction to the vendors that support MAKC. A different vendor will be featured each issue.

Meet Your MAKC Silver Sponsor Blue Ribbon Koi

by Karen Pattist, Connecticut



John and Bob Bianchi

Bob Bianchi built his first pond in 1974 to provide a home for native fish that his oldest son John caught in a local New York City lake. It was not a Koi pond but had a home made filter and waterfall that provided water quality which successfully supported a spawning during the first spring that the pond was in operation. When he moved to Virginia in 1977, Bob responded to a note at a local pet shop that was soliciting hobbyists interested in keeping Koi. He called the number on the note and reached the home of Dick & Betty Roemer in Annandale, VA. The Roemers became Bob's mentors and they introduced him to the wonderful hobby of Koi keeping.

Bob read every article and book that he could get his hands on, and became one of the founding members of MAKC at a meeting at Joe Zuritzky's home in Philadelphia, PA. He learned from the literature and the Roemers that Koi needed a specially balanced diet that included Spirulina for color and vitamins for health. He started searching for Koi food produced in the USA that included the same nutrients as the Koi food from Japan, and discovered a dealer in California that manufactured & sold

Winner's Circle Koi Food. When Bob called to order his first bag, the manufacturer was thrilled to have a sale in New Jersey, and told Bob that he was looking for a distributor on the East Coast. Bob had no interest in selling Koi food as he was employed full time as a chemist for the federal government. The manufacturer followed up on the sale and called Bob after a few weeks to find out if he liked the food, and then asked him if he would reconsider becoming the East Coast distributor for Winners Circle Koi food. When Bob's son John arrived home from High School that day, Bob suggested that they consider going into business together. They scraped together the money to buy a whole pallet of Koi food, and that purchase would launch Blue Ribbon Koi.

Blue Ribbon Koi started its odyssey just selling Koi food. But every time they attended a Mid-Atlantic Koi Club meeting, members asked if they would also carry pumps, filters and other Koi supplies. Slowly, Bob and John started to carry a few more products. They stored the entire inventory in their garage in NJ, and only sold to club members at meetings. Finally, they decided to produce a catalog and offer their products to customers outside the commuting area. Club members often came to their house to ask advice, buy products and see their 1,500 GAL pond.

In 1992 the business moved to Virginia, and they built a larger storage facility to hold their growing product line. Blue Ribbon Koi was still a dry goods business that Bob and John operated on nights and weekends only – they both maintained day jobs. They decided to build their own 9000 gallon Koi pond in their backyard with the help of Wayne Orchard, Dave Hester, Dick Roemer and Bob Rupp. They had several club meetings at their home where Dick Ashbaugh of Koi Unlimited brought Koi for sale. Many members suggested that Bob and John add Koi to their inventory but they were not ready to deal with livestock.

In 1999 the owner of Monumental Landscaping was having a problem with the water quality in his pond and sought advice from Blue Ribbon Koi. He learned about Blue Ribbon Koi from a customer referral and asked how he could improve the quality of his water and see his fish. He had a mixture of goldfish, blue gills and cat fish and he loved them all. Bob



recommended a UV sterilizer and a higher capacity water pump. The results were outstanding and Butch Neilson could once again see his fish. , Butch suggested to Bob & John that they move their business to his property in Chantilly, VA which could help grow the Blue Ribbon Koi business. Bob and John moved the business to their new retail location in 1999.

In their spacious new location, they expanded the business to include livestock for the first time. They put in four 800 gallon tanks with independent filter systems to display Koi for sale. They started to buy imported Koi from Japan, and some domestic butterfly Koi. They geared their fish sales towards serious hobbyists, but soon discovered that their retail location was drawing in water gardening enthusiasts in addition to Koi keepers. It wasn't long before they started to carry a full line of pond plants, as well as smaller Koi and a variety of goldfish. They were so busy that they didn't have time for catalogs and a mail-order business.

For three years Blue Ribbon Koi continued to operate only on weekends, while Bob continued to work at his government day job, and John went to his job in the restaurant industry. They



Some of the Blue Ribbon Koi Sales Tanks

always thought about the day when they might start working in the Koi business full time. John also kept salt-water aquariums, but as the business grew, he found that he was spending more time enjoying Koi. John became known for his practical advice. He didn't try to push customers into buying specific products, but instead explained the theory behind the issue, and talked about the products he had experience with. He tried to explain to customers that they didn't need to be a slave to pond maintenance if they had the correct pond design and equipment.

In 2002, the property in Chantilly was sold to a developer, and Blue Ribbon Koi needed to move again. They found a place outside the Manassas Battlefields in Catharpin, VA. The new

store is co-located with Premier Nursery and Garden Center and had an area that was three times as large as their previous facility and had plenty of room for both Koi and plants. One of the first priorities was to build a proper display Koi pond. With the help of Premier owner, Don Doxxse a 14,000 GAL Koi pond decorated the landscape. The experience of building two large ponds and several small ponds and the manpower and equipment from Premier, allowed John to expand the still developing business to include pond building. John was determined to establish the reputation of building "real Koi ponds." In February of 2004, John decided to take over Blue Ribbon Koi as his full time job. He opened the store from Thursdays to Sundays, and then worked Monday though Wednesdays doing contract pond maintenance, design and construction. John often jokes about the maintenance part of the job. "I figure pond mucking is a natural to be on the Discovery Channel program about the World's Worst Jobs," laughs John. He continues, "We often get called to come clean a rock-bottom pond that has been collecting debris for years, and we shovel 6-10" of smelly slime from the bottom." He encourages the owners to get rid of the rocks so that the pond stays healthier and the maintenance is easier. He also advises the owners about water quality and helps them install bottom drains, bead filtration and external pumps.

The business continued to grow, but the winters have always been slow while the Koi are dormant in outdoor ponds. Approximately six months ago, John decided to expand the business into the marine aquarium market with invertebrates, corals and salt-water fish. This would help bring in customers during the winter. He installed 20 marine sales tanks and a



Some of the 20 marine sales tanks

260 gallon display tank. Come spring, they will still be getting in their shipment of Japanese and domestic Koi. The shop has 7,000 gallons of water to accommodate only the finest Koi from well known breeders.

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Incoming Koi are first put in Quarantine for 2-3 weeks above 74 degrees, and then moved to the sales tanks. No matter



John and Bob hand-feeding their koi!

where the fish come from, they stay in the quarantine facility and are checked for parasites and bacteria before they are sold to the public. John takes great pride in selling healthy, good quality fish for a reasonable price. They won't sell any Koi that have a potential problem. "Our business is primarily word of mouth," says John, "and a good reputation is what makes or breaks us." The business still revolves around providing training and reliable free advice. John shows customers their options, and lets them make up their own minds about what they want to purchase.

Both the Koi and the marine sides of the business continue to grow. Blue Ribbon carries a full line of pond products and Koi. They design ponds, and offer construction and maintenance contracts. They offer service as either weekly, bi-weekly or monthly pond visits. They know that customers with a new pond want the piece of mind that comes with a regular inspection to be sure that the mechanical elements are working properly. John tests the water to ascertain that it remains a good environment for the Koi, and he leaves a card with the test results along with his recommendation on what to do next. "Poor water quality is one of the most common stressors of Koi," explains John. "And once the Koi are stressed, their

compromised immune systems can quickly allow parasites and bacteria to cause disease."

John attended the course on Koi Health that was offered at the University of Georgia in 2005. He is constantly barraged with Koi health questions, and tries to explain to his customers that prevention is a much better cure. He doesn't believe in using any medication until he understands what is causing the problem. John teaches that "Any medication is stressful to Koi, so we need to know exactly what we are dealing with before we treat with something unnecessary or with a product that doesn't cure the problem." He offers FREE diagnostic tests to all Koi owners. If a customer brings a sick Koi to John at the shop, he will take scrapings of the Koi's slime coat and gills and examine them under the microscope. Depending on what he sees, he can best advise the owner on how to treat the problem. John reports that 90% of the parasites he runs into are flukes, which are now easily treated. He also occasionally sees fish lice, anchor worms and Ick. John is happy to report that his arsenal of treatments is much better than

it used to be, and all common parasites can be treated successfully if the infestation is caught in time.

John understands that because there are always bacteria in the water, there is the potential for the Koi to pick up a bacterial



The Blue Ribbon Koi 14,000 gallon display pond, beautifully planted, with a great waterfall and happy Koi!

infection. Bacterial infections generally occur when there is a disruption in the slime coat which is the Koi's natural defense



Some of the wonderful water lilies available at Blue Ribbon Koi

against illness. “Rough handling, flashing, sharp objects such as rocks and parasites all compromise the slime coat and can allow bacteria to infect the Koi,” informs John. He also tries to explain to Koi owners that overcrowding is another major stressor which can compromise Koi health. The key to successful Koi keeping is good water quality which is why John always recommends regular water changes and at a minimum, testing for ammonia, nitrites, pH and total alkalinity.

About 75% of John’s business is in helping customers retrofit ponds to make them healthier for Koi. “Everyone eventually ends up with fish in their ponds!” exclaims John. While many customers start with simple water features, they eventually add goldfish, and then inexpensive Koi. “A rock-bottom pond can quickly deteriorate into an unhealthy toilet,” says John. Another problem caused by too much detritus in ponds is the build-up of toxic hydrogen sulfide gas. When Koi stir up the bottom muck, they release a mushroom cloud of deadly poison. John says that “Getting rid of rocks and installing a bottom drain is the first step towards keeping a healthy pond.”

While John carries a huge variety of hardy lilies, tropical lilies and bog plants, he does not recommend putting them where Koi can get at them. “Koi not only eat the plants, but they like

to root around in the gravel and potting media and they make a terrible mess!” mutters John. He advises plants to be protected from Koi or to be planted where the Koi cannot get at them. He sells his plants already in pots with gravel for immediate planting, but suggests that when the plants need to be divided, the owner should consider using some form of soil-less aquatic planting media. “Plant nutrients are derived from the water not the soil, and all water plants are really best without soil,” says John

The Blue Ribbon web site (www.BlueRibbonKoi.com) is very educational, and also contains a portfolio of pictures of ponds that John has built. Many products can be found and purchased from the on-line catalog, but all fish must be acquired in person. “The Koi are never exactly like they look in pictures,” explains John. He likes customers to spend some time looking at the Koi, observing their personalities and being able to judge their conformation from all angles. He lets customers know when new Koi are out of quarantine and available for viewing.

One of John’s most exciting projects is his current experimentation with Reverse Osmosis Deionized (RODI) water for Koi. While RO water is the norm for salt water tanks, the system is not commonly used for Koi. John is experimenting with various combinations of filters and flow rates to try to develop a usable system for keeping better pond water. “RO removes all heavy metals, chloramines, phosphates and silicates and produces perfect water for marine aquaria,” informs John. The addition of salt provides the trace amounts of chemicals required to replicate a natural marine environment. John says the problem with city or well water is that you don’t know exactly what is in your water. The RO process might end up being a practical solution for many areas with poor water quality.

John’s favorite Koi is a female Ochiba that he has raised from a tosaï to 24”. He



A small RO unit can deliver about 200 gallons of perfect water every day!

doesn’t keep a pond at home because both his house and his neighborhood have small children, but does have a 215 gallon marine tank. John’s father, Bob, has a 9000 gallon Koi pond, and his largest Koi is over 36”. Bob has had one of his Koi for over 25 years! Both John and

Bob continue to be committed to providing exceptional service and quality products at reasonable prices. ❖