

A photograph of a pond filled with various koi fish. A hand is visible in the upper left corner, reaching down towards a large koi fish. The fish are in shades of orange, white, and black. The water is dark, and there are some green plants visible at the bottom.

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Hand Taming Fish

by Sandee Hennessy



Lucy (the Hi Utsuri) and her friends, photo by Ed Champigny

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As far as hand taming fish. Hm-m-m.

It helps to have at least **one** in the tank that likes people, but it is not necessary if you are patient. My sister's fish were really wild when she got them and would dash around and slam into the end of the tank if you even walked in the room. At feeding time, they would huddle at the other end of the tank and wait till you left the room before they would eat.

I watched them for a while. I told her to let them get a little hungry (not ravenous) and then just put one or two pellets in the end away from them and step back a couple of feet. Eventually one becomes brave enough to come for the food. Let him get it and swim away. Then do the whole process again.

Next go ahead and feed them normally. —They do have little pea brains you know. Within a few days the other fish figure out that the guy who goes to the person gets fed first and you are on your way.

I personally feel it's very important not to let them get so hungry that they frenzy, because then they aren't thinking. Think about **yourself**. It is really hard to enjoy some little gourmet delight if you are so hungry you could eat the wall paper.

She now has a fish that will take food from her mouth—are we nuts or what?

Once they are comfortable in coming to you for food, put a few pellets in and trail your hand in the water. At first they may be a little afraid to come for food with your hand there, but again, one will be brave and take a chance. **Don't even think about touching them yet.**

More time passes and you put your hand in with no food. They aren't afraid of the hand now and associate it with food. When they approach the hand really closely give them a pellet or two. Eventually they will pluck at your hand, when they do that give them a little food.

I make the little koi give me "fishy kisses" before they get food. Sometimes they feel like they are going to tear off my hide, but as they get bigger their mouths get softer and they are lots less aggressive.

Once you get fishy kisses it's an easy matter to just lightly brush your hand along them while they are eating—pretend it's an accident. They may kind of quiver at first—like you do when a bug is crawling on you. Over time you will be able to cradle them in your hand or stroke them gently. I try to avoid touching along the lateral line. I just feel this is a really sensitive area. Tummies and backs and mouths seem fine.

I don't put my fist in the water with food in it. I have seen people do this and the fish come up and suck it out, but again I feel when they do that the fish are not really thinking they are just frenzied. I would rather have them come to me of their own accord with the hopes that they will get food. It's sort of like training a mammal with food rewards and gradually removing the food until they forget about it.

Not all fish will respond to this. For example, Savannah will not come to me. It's just her nature and she probably never forgave me for Ernst. Just kidding. She just never has been a **people** fish. She likes to look at me through her magnifying glass that hangs on the tank, but touching and hand feeding is out.

Then on rare occasions you run into one like Ernst and Little Ernie who just crave touching with no food reward at all. Those are both ends of the spectrum and most fish fall somewhere in the middle.

Because Ernst and Little Ernie are so exceptional I hadn't really thought much about all the others in this regard, but the vast majority of my fish will allow some touching and will approach to nibble at me or brush against me. It has one draw back. When I am cleaning tanks I have to be careful that I don't accidentally smack one when I am concentration on the siphon.

Smaller groups of fish are easier to work with than say a couple of dozen in a tank. No more than six at a time seems pretty ideal. That way you can observe and evaluate each fish's response and behavior. Younger is better, but older is not impossible.

When you move them to a new location, sometimes they sort of freak out for a while, but then they settle down again.

That's all I have been able to figure out on the subject. Do I get in the Guinness Book of Records as fish trainer? Maybe I'll teach them to swim through hoops. ❖

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