

## Graceful Gourami Fish

**The reason for gourami fish popularity is easy to see.**

*By Max Gibbs*

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Gourami fish by Tony Terceira. From the tiny sparkling gourami to the mammoth giant gourami there has to be a gourami to please just about everyone. It is certainly true that various gouramis have been the delight of generations of fishkeepers. In the earliest days of the hobby gouramis survived the rigors of sea travel better than most tropical fish, thanks to their ability to breathe air.

The ease of breeding some of the most popular gourami species further enhanced their access to the steadily increasing numbers of post-war WWII hobbyists thirsting for beautiful fish to add to their tropical aquariums. This easy breeding introduced many hobbyists to the sheer magic of being able to observe, at close quarters, the courtship, nest building, egg laying, paternal care, egg development and final progress of the fry to the point of becoming saleable or exchangeable.

An unusual breathing apparatus gave gouramis the descriptive popular title of "labyrinth" fishes. This supplementary breathing organ is a maze-like system of cavity structures lined with tissue that facilitates the absorption of the required oxygen from atmospheric air.

It is usually believed that the labyrinth system supplements gill respiration, but it may also be used to the virtual exclusion of that conventional fish breathing function. It is certain that once the labyrinth system is formed and brought into use gouramis cannot survive on gill respiration alone. Denied the ability to take in atmospheric air they will suffocate and die.

Gourami fry breathe by gill respiration until the labyrinth system develops sufficiently to allow its use. At the changeover stage in aquarium conditions the fry are at a most vulnerable juncture. The air space above the water's surface needs to be well covered to preserve a warm and humid atmosphere ready for the fry to take their first gulp of air. A colder, drier air, such as might exist above an uncovered or poorly covered aquarium in a cold room, could be fatally damaging as the first breath of atmospheric air enters the labyrinth system. Once the organ is in use the fish will need to rise to the surface frequently to expel spent air and take in another fresh supply.

Most gouramis familiar to fishkeepers originally came from Southeast Asia, where they may inhabit waters with either a temporary or permanently poor oxygen content. The depth of the water may drop seasonally to a low level, producing the high temperatures that such shallow waters exposed to tropical sun will inevitably attain.

The flat-topped body of most gouramis suits them to surface living, where the oxygen in the atmosphere is readily accessible. It follows that the overall depth of water need not necessarily be greater than the body depth of the fish. The feeler-like pelvic fins enable gouramis to maintain mobility in murky waters, feeling out obstacles, each other and sensing the bottom substrate.

Color varieties have been produced over the years. The long-time favorite blue gourami (also called the three-spot gourami) was an early refinement of a pure blue color from the dusky natural form. The opaline — or Cosby — gourami followed soon after. Now we have golden and platinum varieties regularly offered.

An important development of dwarf gourami color forms began in Singapore fish farms in the late 1970s, with accelerated progress being experienced in the mid to late 1980s. Notable among these developments are the neon and red varieties.

The name for the genus, *Colisa*, is derived from an Indian native name, *Kholisa*. The anal and dorsal fins of *Colisa* species are about the same length, and long based. The feelers are single, threadlike constructions carried in pairs. They are specialized developments from the pelvic fins. *Colisa* species are opportunistic feeders, taking whatever comes their way, including an ability to spit down insects from overhanging vegetation.

The name of the genus *Trichogaster* is derived from the Greek words *trichias* (hairy) and *gaster* (stomach), alluding to the hair-like pelvic feelers slung under the belly region. *Trichogaster* species are frequently used as valued high-protein food fish in their native lands, either caught from their natural environments or bred specifically for that purpose.

Another bit of trivia is that Sphaerichthys, the generic name for the chocolate gourami, means spherical-bodied fish. Ophronemus, from the Greek osphrone — the sense of smell, thought to be the original function of the labyrinth organ — gives the giant gourami its generic name. The pelvic feelers of Sphaerichthys and Trichopsis species have small areas of tissue and rays at the base, more in keeping with a conventional fin arrangements.

Bright colors, striking markings, elegant deportment and compatibility. Any or all of these qualities may be found in your choice of graceful gourami.

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