Goldfish, Koi Size

What...like we're making this stuff up?

By Stephen M. Meyer

Q. I have been keeping fish for more than 20 years: tropical, marine — you name it, I've had it. Goldfish have always been at the top of my list, and yet I've never had any lasting success with them. After reading several articles and columns of yours concerning stocking levels, I finally decided to try your advice. What really sold me on your advice was the way you said in not so many words, "You're killing your fish."

I am now relocating out of the country and have made many phone calls trying to find a good home for my fish. It seems most people I talk with think you are too extreme in your advice, especially on your suggested (very low) stocking levels. So I took the question where it mattered most. I looked into my 180 gallon tank with six lionheads, and looking back at me were six large, very healthy lionheads. I sincerely thank you and will continue to take your advice.

A. Thank you for your heartening letter. The true reward for writing these columns is the success stories such as yours. I have no doubt that most people you speak with will tell you my stocking recommendations for goldfish and koi are all wet. For the most part I believe this reflects their honest beliefs — no matter how misguided.

The source of the misinformation is usually some unfortunate rule of thumb, such as so many inches of fish per gallon of water, found in many tropical fish books. Or sometimes it's one of the few less-than-honest dealers just wanting to sell more fish.

I can only offer two observations. People who follow my advice and significantly reduce fish loads always report healthier fish that live longer and are more active. They also report far fewer disease and parasite problems. Often they observe spawning for the first time in their fishkeeping experience.

Conversely, I do not know of a single case in which increasing the fish load increased fish health or longevity. Indeed, in almost all cases disease problems multiplied quickly and ultimately the fish died.

So when I suggest that each goldfish should have 30 gallons of water, there's a very good reason. It's advice that has stood the test of experience. Thanks for writing.