



## Education & Human Resources

# Ornamental fish program helps people keep their pet fishes healthy

**S**tudies show that watching ornamental fish swimming about in an aquarium is among the more relaxing pastimes around, and Americans are backing that notion by making it one of the fastest-growing hobbies in the United States.

The vast majority of such pets—guppies, tetras, angel fish, and the ever-popular goldfish—cost just a few dollars each, rarely more than \$10, at your local pet store.

But for the ornamental fish fancier, the collector who is paying hundreds or sometimes thousands of dollars for a specimen, the lack of widespread veterinary knowledge about such fish can be stressful. Buyers of such exotic species may find it less relaxing and more like playing Russian roulette.

For example, recently a Portland koi hobbyist paid \$10,000 for an exotic fish and put it in his pond, only to lose more than \$100,000 worth of fish because of a disease carried by the new acquisition. It's stories like this that drive home the need for more basic information about ornamental fish health.

Enter Tim Miller-Morgan, a doctor of veterinary medicine with Extension Sea Grant at Oregon State University's Hatfield Marine Science Center (HMSC) in Newport. Miller-Morgan, who earned his veterinary degree at Washington State University, is building a program designed to improve the quality of ornamental aquatic animal health and hus-



Ornamental fish specialist Tim Miller-Morgan observes clownfish in an aquarium at Hatfield Marine Science Center, Newport.

bandry in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

"These fish are people's pets, and they generally have quite an emotional attachment to them," Miller-Morgan said. "When these fish become ill, it's that emotional attachment often more than their value that causes the owners distress. We're trying to improve the quality of life for Oregonians' aquatic pets."

Almost 13 million households in the U.S. keep ornamental fish, according to the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council. The total spent on the hobby is more than \$2 billion a year, making it second in popularity only to photography as a hobby. That figure is expected to rise one to two percent annually,

according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, and money spent on the ponds and water sector of the industry is expected to increase 35 percent annually, according to statistics from the National Pond Society.

Yet the amount of scientific information on the subject—how to care for and raise fish that can cost anywhere from a dollar to tens of thousands of dollars—is pretty slim and not well disseminated, Miller-Morgan said. Few practicing veterinarians work on ornamental fish, he added.

His program has pieces aimed at each segment of the industry, from hobbyists to retailers, wholesalers, importers, and local veterinarians.

Had the program been in place just a few years earlier, the hobbyist in the anecdote above—or the person selling him the fish—would have known to quarantine the new fish first to make sure it was healthy and not a danger to others.

Of particular concern, according to Miller-Morgan, are

- High mortality of fish, primarily marine ornamental fish, being shipped from exotic locales to the United States
- Lack of knowledge about basic animal husbandry and biology at all levels of the industry
- Lack of knowledge about basic health-management principles
- Improper antibiotic use and acquisition
- Inadequate veterinary availability

To address these problems, Miller-Morgan has taken a leading role in a pair of initiatives that will increase funding of information on the health of ornamental fish.

Working with the Associated Koi Clubs of America, Miller-Morgan is helping to develop a program to train koi health advisors. He is developing a continuing education piece for the program, teaching in the wet labs and advising the program administrators and the koi health advisors. These volunteers learn how to care for the popular ornamental fish and share that knowledge with other hobbyists.

Kathy Bergh, a koi hobbyist who took part in the koi health advisor program, said it was “as difficult as any class I have ever taken, but presented in a much more encouraging, supportive method than I have ever seen. You make a big commitment in time and materials but gain a wealth of knowledge that is priceless.”

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Bergh was particularly grateful for the amount of work the instructors had to put in, even though most of the material was presented on the World Wide Web. After the 250 participants went through each section of the on-line material, they had to take a test.

“While I only had to take each test once (OK, two or three times) until I passed, the instructors must have spent hours every day correcting tests and retests for all of us. They patiently commented on both correct and incorrect answers,” she said.

“They embodied the philosophy of the KHA [koi health advisor] program: promote koi health by gently teaching good koi husbandry.”

The participants also took part in three “wet labs,” where Miller-Morgan and others taught an intensive course in just about everything there is to know about the exotic ornamental fish.

“Miller-Morgan taught 30 of us more than we ever expected to know about koi,” Bergh said of the sessions she attended.

Miller-Morgan also is working with Oregon Coast Community College to create a two-year professional aquarist training program, educating people to work in a wide variety of posts in the ornamental fish industry. He is also part of the faculty at the OSU College of Veterinary Medicine,

where he teaches courses in ornamental fish medicine.

Miller-Morgan is a native of Washington. He received a bachelor of science degree in biology from the University of Puget Sound and a second bachelor of science in wildlife biology from Washington State University (WSU), before earning his doctor of veterinary medicine degree from the WSU College of Veterinary Medicine.

While pursuing his veterinary degree, he participated in the WSU Aquatic Animal Health Training Program and pursued further clinical training in aquatic animal medicine at Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium, the National Aquarium in Baltimore, the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Clear Springs Trout in Buhl, Idaho, and the Batelle Center for Marine Disease Control in Sequim, Washington.

Miller-Morgan was the senior aquarist and veterinarian at the OSU Hatfield Marine Science Visitor Center before taking his current position with Oregon Extension Sea Grant. He remains a consulting veterinarian to the neighboring Oregon Coast Aquarium and staff veterinarian for the HMSC Visitor Center.