

TOP-VIEW GOLDFISH: THE OTHER PERSPECTIVE

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By some accounts, there are over three hundred varieties of goldfish. These can be grouped in various ways such as by tail type, presence or absence of head growth, presence or absence of dorsal fin, eye shape, etc. They can also be grouped based on whether they were bred and selected to be viewed from the top or viewed from the side.

Originally, all goldfish were kept in shallow ponds, ceramic bowls or other containers and viewed from the top. Considering the thousand-year history of goldfish keeping, the glass aquarium is a relatively new innovation which did not come into use until about 150 years ago. However, being able to easily view goldfish from the side through glass has undoubtedly influenced what characteristics are selected for and impacted the development of new varieties.

Today, the goldfish hobbyists are a diverse group. While most goldfish are destined for the home aquarium and represent an indoor diversion, goldfish ponds, tubs and goldfish in the water garden continue to increase in popularity. When choosing a goldfish, it is important to consider how it will be viewed and select a variety which is appropriate for the setting in which it will be displayed.

In selecting a top-view goldfish, remember that they are typically seen against a dark background. It does not matter what color your tub or pond was when it was new, over time the surfaces will become covered with algae and other growth and appear dark green to black. Without doubt, red and white metallic-scale goldfish provide the contrast to display best against a dark background. Calico coloration does not stand out nearly as well. A black or chocolate top-view goldfish may disappear completely against the dark background. Black moors in particular are like stealth bombers when placed in a black tub or pond. You get an occasional glimpse; then, they seem to vanish before your eyes.

In selecting a top-view goldfish, also consider their ultimate size and the size of the container in which they will be displayed. Some of the hardy varieties get fairly large and will quickly outgrow the confines of a small tub. True, the size of the container influences the growth rate. But, you want your goldfish to be all that it can be and maintain the ideal body conformation for the respective variety. On the other hand, some top-view varieties are not at all suitable for a large outdoor water garden. They are highly bred and "designed" to be kept within the confines of a small container.

OK, my personal bias is starting to show through here. I much prefer to keep and view goldfish from the top. When asked about this preference my pat answer is that I do not like to clean glass, but the truth is deeper and is something I cannot explain. The best I can do is say that goldfish swimming in a pond is serenity while goldfish swimming in an aquarium can sometimes be chaos. So, with that admitted bias, here we will list and briefly describe those goldfish varieties which are most often kept in ponds or are intended to be appreciated from the top view. There is no reason these same varieties cannot be kept in an aquarium and viewed from the side and, in fact, many of the varieties discussed below have a side-view following and a top-view following. In some cases, a single variety can develop into two distinct lines (really, separate varieties in their own right) based on whether they are bred to be viewed from the top or viewed from the side.

COMMON GOLDFISH

I have a certain fondness for common goldfish, but hate the name and prefer the term "hibuna". Common goldfish have the body shape of the ancestral Gibel carp (also called "funa"). It has a single caudal (tail) fin which does not spread much more than the depth of the body. The ends of the fin are rounded. The color is typically orange-red but may be red and white, solid white, yellow, blue, or black (Figure 1).

The common orange goldfish are mass produced for bait, feeder fish and inexpensive aquarium or pond pets. They are given away as prizes by the thousands at state fairs and other festivals in the US; although this practice is increasingly being discouraged. Common goldfish with interesting colors or interesting color patterns are much harder to find. The overwhelming majority of offspring will be solid

orange-red and hibuna do not develop their adult color until they are fairly large. Many have to be grown to four to six inches before they demelanize to reveal the adult coloration and then only 10% will have an interesting and well-balanced two-color pattern. So, the lowly orange-red hibuna is the least expensive type of goldfish. But, you may not be able to find an exceptional hibuna with vibrant color and a pleasing pattern at any price.

Hibuna are, without doubt, the hardiest goldfish variety. They can over-winter in an outdoor pond even in a cold climate. As long as the pond does not freeze solid to the bottom, the hibuna will probably be ok. Actually, there are frequent reports of hibuna being frozen solid in the ice and then reviving with the coming of spring. They may grow to over twelve inches and may live twenty years. Since they retain the conformation of the ancestral carp, they are very agile and quick. This makes them less vulnerable to predation than their slow-moving cousins with the compressed bodies and fancy fins.

COMET

Comets may be the most popular pond or water garden fish in the United States. By most accounts, they originated in the U.S. They are said to have been developed by the federal Fisheries Commission in ponds very near the capital in Washington DC. Comets are similar to common goldfish with a slim body and a single tail. However, the fins are greatly elongated and the tail of the best comets is about three-quarters as long as the body with the upper and lower lobe of the tail fin held open and apart. The fins are pointed as well. The most popular colors are solid red, and red and white. The red and white ones are called by their Japanese name, 'sarasa' (Figure 2). In Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia, the comets with long tails may be called swallow-tails. In recent years a black comet has been developed in China.

Like common goldfish, comets are very hardy and will flourish in water gardens where egg fish and other more highly-bred goldfish varieties do not do well. They get fairly large though. While the body may not get quite as large as a hibuna, if you include their elongated tail fin the comet may be the longest of all goldfish – perhaps sixteen inches. Because of their size, a comet may soon out-grow the confines of a small tub.

SHUBUNKIN

The name 'shubunkin' is Japanese and roughly translates to "calico goldfish". Shubunkin are similar to common goldfish and comets, but with the characteristic calico color pattern. Like all calico-colored goldfish, the shubunkin has clear nacreous scales. Metallic-scale goldfish have their color pigments embedded in the scale itself. Nacreous-scale goldfish, on the other hand, have pigment in the skin below and the color is seen through the clear scales. Black pigment lying deep within the skin appears blue to our eye. Ideally, a shubunkin has a bluish background topped with markings of red, orange, yellow, or brown plus black spots.

Shubunkins are often selected for side-view, but many are also kept in ponds. The shubunkin was first developed in Japan and was improved upon in America during the early 1900's. Later, English breeders bought this variety to its pinnacle. Today, three types of shubunkin are recognized based on the shape of the tail fin. The Japanese/American shubunkin has long fins, forked tail and the tips of the tail are pointed like a comet. The Bristol shubunkin also has a forked tail, but the ends of the tail fin are rounded and the tail resembles the letter 'B' in profile (Figure 3). The London shubunkin has a short round tail fin reminiscent of the common goldfish.

WAKIN

Wakin is the common goldfish of Japan. In the goldfish family tree, the wakin was the first variety to have a double tail. This came about through a single genetic mutation that was then enhanced and perfected through selective breeding. Wakin were largely unknown in the West until about fifteen years ago, but have since become fairly popular. It is a hardy yet beautiful pond fish. The wakin body is long and slender, but the tail is divided and held horizontally. The tail fin is not long like a comet's, but its horizontal orientation makes it show well when viewed from above (Figure 4). The color is red, white, red and white, or occasionally black. Some calico wakin have recently started to appear in the market. The best wakin have a red and white pattern similar to a kohaku koi. But unlike a kohaku, a wakin may be more appealing if there is red in the tail. A white transparent tail tends to disappear against the

background. They are judged on body conformation, how well the tail is held horizontally, quality and intensity of the white and red colors, pattern placement and balance.

Wakin grow large (10-12 inches) and are very hardy. They are an ideal fish for a small ponds and water gardens but may out-grow the confines of a small tub. Because of their horizontal fan tail, wakin are not quite as quick and agile as a common goldfish but they can keep up with most comets and shubunkin.

WATONAI

Watnai were developed by crossing a wakin with a ryukin. They were first described in Japan early in the twentieth century but the variety disappeared thereafter. Most goldfish enthusiasts have never even heard of a watnai. But, they have recently been re-created and small numbers are being sold in the US. Watnai have the long slender body of the wakin, but with a much larger tail which it carries spread horizontally. The width of the tail fin should equal the length of the body. The color is similar to that of a wakin or sarassa comet – red, white, or red-and-white. An interesting and balanced red and white pattern is desirable (Figure 5).

Even with their flamboyant tail, the watnai is a hardy variety which does well and can over-winter in an outdoor pond or water garden. They move a little slower than a wakin, shubunkin, comet or hibuna. They can get fairly large, but the maximum body length is just slightly smaller than these other hardy varieties. Some consider watnai the ultimate hardy goldfish as they have cold tolerance, a fairly large size and a broad flowing tail that makes for an attractive display.

JIKIN

Jikin were developed from wakin in Japan and are also called peacock-tail. The tail is completely divided and splayed outward. Viewed from the rear, the jikin tail is four-lobed and looks like an 'X'. The peacock tail is the defining characteristic of the jikin, not the red and white color pattern. The body is slightly shorter than a wakin or common goldfish. The body color is a metallic white with red markings (Figure 6). There is a "12-point-rule" where it is desirable to have red on the two anal fins, two pectoral fins, two ventral fins, the two gill plates, the two parts of the caudal fin, dorsal fin and lips. Any other red on a jikin is less desirable. Some jikin are "made" by removing misplaced red scales a few at a time when the fish is young. Young fish which have had scales removed can be delicate and prone to disease. However, jikin which have not been subjected to artificial color modifications are hardy and long-lived. There is also a nacreous calico variety of jikin called edojikin. Jikin are rare in the U.S. Good ones are both hard to find and very expensive everywhere.

FANTAIL

Fantails are technically a fancy variety (as opposed to a hardy variety) but in some sense today's fantail bridges a gap between the two. The fantail does not have the slender body of the hardy varieties discussed above. The depth of the body is about 60% of the body length in the fantail versus about 35% in wakin and the single-tail varieties. This came about by genetic mutation(s) which reduced the number of vertebrae in the backbone. Fantails and ryukin are close cousins. What we call a fantail today was called a ryukin a century ago before selective breeding dramatically increased the height of the ryukin hump. If the truth be known, some fantails being sold today are culls from ryukin spawns – they are ryukins which did not develop the humped back. Fantails come in a variety of colors including red and white metallic scale and calico, but the metallic scale lines are generally more robust and more suitable for the pond environment. When viewed from above, there is a lot of variation in the fantail's tail (Figure 7). Some tails which look fine from the side appear to be collapsed when viewed from above. Other tails look too flat when viewed from the side but are spectacular when viewed from above. Fantails are generally sold as inexpensive aquarium fish. However, if you take the time to select those individuals who have a strong tail that is held fully spread you can have a beautiful top-view goldfish for the water garden or tub.

The short stubby body of the fantail will never grow as large as hardy varieties. They may be eight inches from tip to tip. Fantails cannot tolerate as much cold weather as their hardy ancestors and they are more likely to be picked off by the neighbor's cat or a heron. However, they will generally fare better than the other varieties of fancy goldfish. Some "fantails" are not fantails at all and are born with a single tail. This

is simply a throw-back to their single-tail ancestors. These are called nymphs in the West and tomasaba or sabao in the East. While these single tail fish do not create the dramatic display of the fantail, they are more robust and generally tolerate lower temperatures.

TOSAKIN

Tosakin were developed in Japan from ryukin and are rarely found in the West. While ryukin are difficult to appreciate from above, tosakin were bred to be a top-view fish. The most outstanding feature is the large undivided double tail which re-curves back toward the head. It is, by far, the most elaborate tail of any goldfish variety. The body should taper towards a slender nose like a teardrop (Figure 8). When viewed from the side, the elaborate Tosakin tail appears flat and unimpressive. The angle at which the tail joins the body is important and those whose tail joins the body at an upturned angle do not swim well. These fish with up-turned tails will unintentionally do summersaults when excited. One fellow refers to such poor swimmers as “acrobats”.

Tosakin are generally kept in shallow bowls or tubs and the shallow depth is said to help the tail develop and properly display. The traditional Japanese tosakin bowl is a shallow two-foot diameter glazed earthenware crock (Figure 9). Don't let the word 'bowl' fool you. The tosakin bowl is nothing like what we used to call a “goldfish bowl” here in the U.S. Traditionally, the tosakin bowl is managed with weekly water changes but without filtration or supplemental aeration. We have a tosakin bowl in our home but are not brave enough to keep them without some water movement. An inconspicuous filter hidden behind the bowl has made keeping them trouble-free. The crock may be kept inside or outside but a porch, patio or lanai is perfect. Several tosakin in such a container makes an attractive, almost surreal, display.

Tosakin do not grow very large and are not robust enough to be kept in large outdoor ponds. No, tosakin are not hardy goldfish. Do not leave them outside in the winter. Do not leave them in full sun all day. They are not very fast, so do not let some varmint snatch them.

TOP-VIEW RANCHU

There are two distinct types of ranchu; side-view and top-view. The Chinese and most of the rest of the world generally produce and keep side-view ranchu. The top-view ranchu was developed in Japan and most of the good ones still come from Japan although they are also being grown in Thailand and elsewhere. The most important characteristics for top-view ranchu are a large rectangular head, a long broad back and broad caudal peduncle (when seen from above), uniform scale arrangement and a properly shaped tail that folds in as the fish swims, and then open like a flower when it stops (Figures 10 and 11). The smooth curvature of the back which is so important in side-view ranchu is of much less importance in top-view ranchu. A good top-view ranchu will swim strongly and effortlessly and the ability to swim well is very important in top-view ranchu competitions. Top-view ranchu only come in metallic colors: orange, red, or red and white. Solid white is less desirable and top-view ranchu are never calico, black or any other color.

Breeding and grooming top-view ranchu is a cult of sorts. In Japan, there are clubs (kai), magazines and numerous competitions devoted to this single goldfish variety. A top Japanese show winner can be worth five figures. There are also enclaves of top-view ranchu enthusiasts throughout Southeast Asian, in Europe and the U.S. They write books about top-view ranchu and we cannot do them justice in this short article.

BUTTERFLY-TAIL DEMEKIN

Demekin are also called Telescopes, Dragon-Eyes or Moors, although the term “Moor” should properly be reserved for all-black Demekin. The protruding eyes of the Demekin give them a bizarre appearance that is particularly striking when viewed from above. While telescopes are generally thought of as a side-view aquarium fish, one variety can only be fully appreciated from above – the butterfly-tail demekin. Demekin can have any of several tail shapes including the broadtail or veil tail, and fantail. Despite frequent confusion, the butterfly-tail is easy to differentiate from other demekin - the shape of the tail must look like a butterfly. If it takes an over-active imagination to see a butterfly shape, then it is not a butterfly-tail demekin. It should be unmistakable. As this variety has become popular creative marketing has tried to

stretch the acceptable limits of the tail shape, but if it does not look like a butterfly to your eye then it is not a real butterfly-tail.

Demekin in general do not grow very large – perhaps eight inches including the tail. Demekin are not considered especially hardy and they will have a hard time competing for food with the more agile single-tail varieties. Butterfly-tail demekin come in a wide variety of colors including black, red, black/red, black/white (panda), chocolate, blue, calico, etc. But, as noted above, goldfish which are black, chocolate or other dark colors tend to disappear against a black background.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

Oranda are generally a side-view fish but there is some interest in breeding oranda for viewing from the top. A broad veiltail is more desirable than a thin ribbon tail when viewed from above. An attractive top-view oranda will have a tail that looks too flat when that same fish is seen from the side. Oranda generally have a broad head and belly, but a narrow caudal peduncle when viewed from the top. In my opinion, this narrow peduncle makes for a poor transition from the belly to the tail and detracts from their overall appearance as a top-view goldfish.

Pearlscales, also called as tiku (mouse), ping pong or golf ball goldfish, are equally attractive as side-view or top-view goldfish to many of us. The crown pearlscale or hamamishiki also has a wen which is one or two uniform bumps on the head. Of course, the defining characteristics of a Pearlscale are the domed scales and the round body shape. These two unusual characteristics seem to be genetically linked. A good pearlscale will appear round when seen from either vantage point. The crown pearlscale has a goose-head wen. Pearlscale have a reputation for being delicate but I think this characteristic is somewhat over-stated. In the right situation, they are trouble-free. Pearlscale are not for the large water garden and they are not agile enough to compete for food with hardy varieties. They are best kept only with other pearlscales. Pearlscales make for a very attractive and unusual display in a small water feature or tosakin bowl.

SHOWING TOP-VIEW GOLDFISH

On a world-wide basis, the most heavily contested of these goldfish varieties is undoubtedly the top-view ranchu. As noted there are shows devoted exclusively to top-view ranchu throughout Asia and even in Europe. The most intense competition is in Japan. There are local shows, followed by regional shows and culminating in the All-Japan Ranchu Show. It's a big deal. But, if you take a fine top-view ranchu to a show in the US it will probably be placed in an aquarium and judged from the side. This situation will likely persist until top-view ranchu and side-view ranchu are recognized as separate varieties and judged accordingly.

Of the various top-view goldfish discussed above, the single-tail varieties and jikin are probably most amenable to being shown and judged from the side. The tosakin tail is very flat and from the side you do not see much of anything. Butterfly-tail demekin also have a fairly flat tail and the butterfly shape cannot be appreciated from the side. To a lesser extent, this is also true of wakin and watonai.

With the proliferation of water gardens and other water features around the home, top-view varieties are becoming more popular. It is not just comets anymore. Slowly, a critical mass of some of the less common top-view varieties is developing. The logical extension of this trend would be for goldfish shows to begin displaying and judging some varieties in shallow bowls instead of aquaria. In Asia, the standard show bowl is a 20 to 24 inch diameter white enamel basin, like the white enamel wash pans of yesteryear. White or blue plastic bowls would be easier to find and work just as well for show purposes.

IN SUMMARY

Choose a goldfish which will display well in the intended setting. If that setting is anything except a glass aquarium, then you should consider one of the top-view varieties. Choose a large hardy variety for a large water garden. Choose a smaller, more ornate top-view variety for a whiskey barrel, tub or smaller water feature. If you will only see your pet from above, then choose one which has been bred to look its best from that vantage point.

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All photos by Steve Hopkins