

Help! My fish are unwell

Water quality?

If you have noted a fish health issue, in many cases it will be related to stress due to a water quality problem. Treating fish with a medication is unlikely to prove of much lasting benefit unless any underlying water quality issues are also dealt with. If a large number of fish have suddenly started to behave unusually (e.g. hanging or mouthing at the water surface), then suspect a water quality problem to be at least partly to blame.

Oxygen levels

You can boost oxygen levels in the water by turning on any pumps that disturb the water surface, such as fountains, waterfalls or air-pumps. This is especially important in hot weather when pumps are best run 24hrs a day. Remember that underwater "oxygenating" plants only produce oxygen during daylight hours. In ponds without pumps, see our leaflet on "Help, there is a power failure" for advice on boosting pond oxygen levels.

Pond filters

Biological pond filters greatly improve water quality when they are functioning correctly. However, if their activity has been disrupted by becoming blocked, by a power cut, or by strong pond treatments, then water quality may drop rapidly. Dirty, clogged filters should be cleaned according to the manufacturer's advice, using pond water - not tap water. Remember, biological filters should be run 24hrs a day throughout the season.

Feeding fish

If fish have inexplicably gone off their food, this can be another sign of a problem. Even if they are still feeding, trim back on the amount of food fed until the problem is sorted, and be sure to net out any uneaten food.

What to look for

If one or two fish are ill, look out for specific symptoms to aid in diagnosis. Is there any obvious damage to the skin or tail, e.g. from heron or cat attack? Are the sick fish beating their gills at an abnormally fast or slow rate? Is the skin surface unusually hazy in appearance? Are the scales or eyes protruding? Are affected fish hanging beside the waterfall or fountain? Are fish scratching/flicking onto their sides with unusual frequency?

If you take a little time to watch your fish when you are in the garden, you will get to know their normal behaviour. It is then easier to spot any unusual behaviour that might suggest a problem.

One fish, losing its balance

Fish have small air-sacs inside them, called the swim bladder. This helps them to maintain their buoyancy in the water. In some cases this sac can become damaged or distorted, and affected fish then have to depend on their fins to maintain their balance. This causes more problems in the winter when fish are sluggish and have less energy to use their fins. Affected fish may tend to float or sink, or roll at an angle, and may appear to struggle to keep their balance. The problem sometimes disappears in warmer weather, only to reappear the following winter. Swim bladder problems are more common in the fancy types of goldfish with shorter bodies, and are not normally treatable. Some affected fish may live for many years without coming to harm, while others might be more vulnerable to infections.

Precautions

Whilst fish problems are occurring, do not add any new fish to the pool. When purchasing fish for your pond, buy only from reputable suppliers (e.g. members of a trade association such as OATA or PKDA) who routinely acclimatise and health-check their new fish, and who can offer support and back-up if you have problems with any new fish purchases. Do not buy fish from tanks where other fish appear unwell.

Take care to build up fish stocks gradually in a new pond, and check that your pond is suited to the fish varieties chosen (e.g. koi will require larger ponds which should ideally be filtered to a high standard). Always avoid overstocking.

What to do next

Testing the water quality, and closely examining fish can often pinpoint the cause of any problem. If skin parasite problems and minor bacterial infections are caught early enough, they can usually be treated very successfully. More severe bacterial infections such as ulcers can prove difficult to control.

We can visit and carry out the necessary tests and microscopic examinations as required. Contact us to discuss any issues you are concerned about or to arrange an on-site consultation. © 2012