



蘭蘇園



FISH GUIDE

FINNED FRIENDS OF LAN SU



Photo by Charlie Zhang

THE CARP, THE GOLDFISH, & THE KOI

Koi and goldfish are both domesticated varieties of carp, but from different species. Goldfish (*Carassius auratus*) were bred from wild Prussian carp in China over 1,000 years ago, while koi (*Cyprinus rubrofuscus*) were developed from Amur carp in Japan in the early 1800s. The word “koi” comes from the Japanese term “Nishikigoi” (錦鯉), meaning “brocade carp.”

Carp have been domesticated in China for over 2,000 years, mostly for food. The breeding of goldfish as ornamental pets began during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) and became popular in the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE).

Although koi are closely linked to Japan today, carp were introduced there centuries earlier as a food source. It wasn’t until the early 19th century in Niigata that selective breeding produced the colorful koi we recognize today.



DID YOU KNOW?

Although koi like the ones in our pond would not have been found in Ming dynasty scholar's gardens, there certainly were fishponds that were often filled with schools of goldfish. Nowadays, you can still find goldfish in many scholar's gardens in Portland's sister city, Suzhou, China.



FISH TALES

If you visit our Knowing the Fish pavilion, you can find a shady place to sit and contemplate the fish, just as the scholar might have. Visit our **Discover Lan Su Visitor mobile app** to hear traditional Chinese stories and learn more about our fish!

[GET THE APP](#)



THE POETRY COUPLET THAT ADORNS THE KNOWING THE FISH PAVILION 知魚亭 READS:

此即濠濶非我非魚皆樂境

This is the river Hao, a realm of happiness, be it for me or for the fish;

偶來亭畔在山在水有遺香

Casually stopping at the pavilion, I find lingering fragrance over mountain and water.



In Chinese culture, fish, especially carp, symbolize **abundance, prosperity, and good fortune**. The word for fish (魚, yú) sounds like the word for surplus (餘, yú), reinforcing the idea of having more than enough.

Fish, and carp in particular, have also been associated with **dragons** in Chinese symbolism. One legend states that any carp that could ascend a legendary hundred-foot-high waterfall and leap through the Dragon Gate (鯉躍龍門) at the top would be transformed into a powerful dragon. This story is also commonly referred to as an allegory for the harrowing imperial examination that Chinese scholars had to pass in order to ascend to their positions of power.



HAVE YOU MET CHIWEN?

If you look up to the roof of our Hall of Brocade Clouds, you might also be able to spot our two **Chiwen**, which are powerful half carp, half dragon creatures that swallow up all evil and guard against fires.



BABY KOI

IS IT A KOI OR A GOLDFISH?

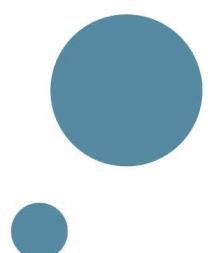
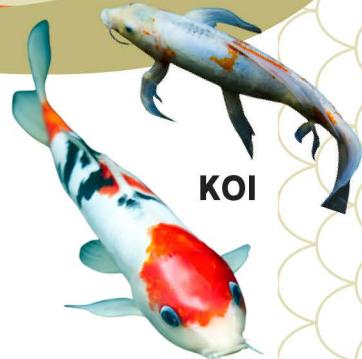
We have goldfish in our pond as well as koi! Can you spot them? Here are some of the differences to look for:

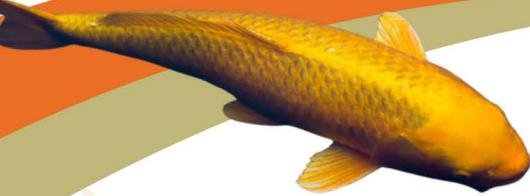
Goldfish are usually smaller than koi, but don't be fooled —our pond also has baby koi that are about the same size! Look closely for other differences.

Koi have barbels, which are little whisker-like feelers near their mouths, like a catfish. Goldfish don't have these, making this one of the easiest ways to tell them apart!

Goldfish have rounder bodies, while koi are longer and more torpedo-shaped.

Goldfish come in more shapes and fin types, while koi have a bigger variety of colors and patterns





KOI FACTS & FAQS

How many fish are at Lan Su?

As of spring 2025, we have about 45 large koi, but our fish love their home here and lay eggs in the spring and summer. This means we often have lots of baby fish—more than we can count!

How old are the fish?

Our fish are donated, so we don't know their exact ages. However, some of them may be between 15 and 20 years old. Goldfish usually live 10–15 years, while koi can live 25–30 years!

Where do the fish go in the winter?

Koi and goldfish are very cold-tolerant because they come from northern parts of Eurasia. In winter, they enter a sleep-like state called torpor, where they move slowly, breathe less, and don't need to eat. If you can't see the koi in winter, it's because they are resting in the deepest part of the pond!

Are koi smart?

Yes! Koi are very intelligent and can be trained. They learn to come when called for food, swim to certain spots for meals, and even recognize the faces of the people who feed them!

What do the fish eat?

When the water is warm enough, our fish get a diet of specially formulated koi food. Throughout the summer, they often get bits of fruit and vegetables as treats if they are behaving! Our koi also enjoy foraging in the rocks and plants around our pond for bugs and algae year-round.

How big do koi get?

A common myth says koi and goldfish only grow as big as their container, but that's not true! As long as they have enough food and space, they keep growing their entire lives. Most koi reach about 24 inches by the time they are three years old. Some jumbo koi can even grow up to three feet long!

