Stocking & Harvesting Recreational Fish Ponds

Proper stocking and harvesting of recreational fish ponds is paramount to the long-term success and enjoyment of recreational fish ponds. Some pond managers attempt natural stocking and/or establishing a number of different species within a pond. Research, however, shows it is critical that only the proper species and numbers be stocked and harvested in a recreational fish pond.

Largemouth bass fingerlings are ready for stocking in a pond. W. Cory Heaton, ©2015, Clemson Extension

A surprising amount of research has been done to establish the proper prey and predator species and stocking rates for establishing recreational fish ponds in the Southern United States. Many different combinations of predator and prey species have been tried for recreational fish pond stocking. The best strategy is stocking largemouth bass as the predator species and bream as the prey species. The proper ratio to stock is a 10:1 bream to largemouth bass ratio. These species at the proper ratio will allow for good, long-term fishing.

If good fish growth and proper pond balance are to be maintained, the pond manager must initially determine whether or not he plans to maintain a long-term fertilization program before stocking his pond (see HGIC 1710, Fertilizing Recreational Fish Ponds).

If the pond is to be fertilized, it should be stocked at a ratio of 1000 bream to 100 largemouth bass per acre. If the pond will not be fertilized, it should be stocked at a ratio of 500 bream and 50 largemouth bass per acre. The bream species stocked are a ratio of 3:1 bluegill to shellcracker. This bream ratio allows for more efficient food selection within the pond since they feed on different organisms and an opportunity to enjoy a greater variety of fishing opportunities. If the pond manager is unsure as to whether or not he will fertilize, it is best to stock at the unfertilized pond stocking rate of 500 bream and 50 bass per acre. Overstocking of a pond can rapidly lead to poorly nourished fish, poor fish health and a reduction in reproductive success, which can lead to an out-of-balance fish pond that will need renovation (see HGIC 1713, Use of Rotenone for Management of Fish Populations).

Research has shown that the minimum size pond that can be stocked for long term production of quality fish is a quarter-acre. For ponds less than a quarter-acre it is best to stock single species such as channel catfish or hybrid bream that can be fed. These ponds will need to be harvested and restocked every few years.

Fish may be purchased from licensed private fish hatcheries. Bream are stocked in the fall or winter; largemouth bass are stocked the following spring or early summer. The bream are stocked early enough so they can obtain a large enough size not to be preyed upon by the bass the first year. The largemouth bass are stocked in the spring so they
can obtain a large enough size by the following spring to reproduce.

The initial harvest of fish should start in midsommer one year after the largemouth bass stocking. Largemouth bass reproduce only once a year, so it is extremely important to allow for the initial bass reproduction before initiating any fish harvest.

It is important that pond mangers attempt to regulate the amount of fish harvested from the pond on an annual basis. The proper harvesting program will produce good fishing for a number of years. It is important to follow the harvesting recommendations and not underfish or overfish your pond.

Under-fishing and overfishing can both lead to an out-of-balance fish population characterized by small, stunted fish.

**Annual Fish Harvest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Bream</th>
<th>Bass</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fertilized</strong></td>
<td>100-125 lbs/acre/year</td>
<td>25 lbs/acrs/year</td>
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<td><strong>Pond</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unfertilized</strong></td>
<td>40-50 lbs/acre/year</td>
<td>10 lbs/acre/year</td>
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Pond managers should remember that bream reproduce several times a year while largemouth bass reproduce only once a year. It is important to remove bream each year so that the population remains at a healthy size and stunting of the bream population does not occur. Correspondingly, over harvesting of largemouth bass can lead to reduced removal of bream by bass and a large population of intermediate-sized, stunted bream that are still able to reproduce.

Fish harvest should be spread throughout the year and no more than a quarter of the total annual harvest should be removed in any single month. During the first harvest season pond managers may wish to slightly underharvest the bass so that the predator species population can be properly established.

**Other Fish Species**

Only a select few other fish species may be stocked in the traditional bass/bream recreational fish pond. One hundred channel catfish per acre may be stocked. Channel catfish usually do not successfully reproduce in traditional recreational fish ponds, so they can be harvested and restocked without a significant effect on the bass and bream populations.

Triploid grass carp can be stocked in ponds for aquatic weed control. Since they have three sets of chromosomes and are sterile, they do not reproduce and do not have significant effects on the traditional populations.

Tilapia, a tropical species, can be stocked for aquatic weed control for additional forage for bass. Tilapia do reproduce but are a tropical species and generally die during our cold winter months.

Stocking a pond with tilapia will help with weed control and also provide an additional food source for bass.
Golden shiners, a type of bait minnow, are frequently used in recreational fish ponds. Golden shiners can grow to a large size and rapidly reproduce, causing major problems in the fish population, and it is highly recommended that they not be used in recreational fish ponds.