

## LOCAL BUSINESS

## Third generation fish hatchery still producing

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THURMONT, Md. – One might think raising goldfish and fancy carp (koi) for fish tanks and yard ponds might not be among the most lucrative business ventures, but at least one multi-generation operation is still, well, keeping its head above water.

Located about six miles south of Thurmont at 1071 Putnam Road (take a right off U.S. 15 onto Fish Hatchery Road, and then a left on Putnam) is Eaton's Fish Hatchery, one of the remaining goldfish and carp raising operations that once proliferated in the county.

Stephen Eaton, who runs the business along with his wife Roxanne and daughter Tanzy Logue, a dental hygiene student at Frederick Community College, is the third generation of Eatons to raise goldfish and koi on lands bisected by Putnam Road.

### Three generations and a lot of fish

The Eaton's Fish Hatchery traces its roots to Stephen Eaton's grandfather, Sam, who began raising goldfish on land along the east side of Putnam Road. "Everybody had ponds in those days," Eaton said, although he said he wasn't sure when his grandfather started raising the fish.

Eaton's father, John, took up the enterprise in the early 1940s, a business that eventually sprawled

to some 300 acres on both sides of Putnam, with more than 100 of those acres comprised of ponds.

As Eaton took over the operation of the growing hatchery, purchasing the business from his father in 1976, he added koi, a fancy Japanese carp. koi were developed by the Japanese over 2,000 years ago and are a favorite among homeowners with lawn ponds or rock gardens. A large, foot-long, lace-finned koi can cost about \$40.

Although the family's principle product remains goldfish and koi, the business has added minnows, crayfish, chicken liver and night crawlers for bait, large tadpoles, frogs, turtles, and pond plants. In addition, pellet fish food for outdoor fish is available for bulk purchase.

The hatchery once produced feeder fish, goldfish bred mainly for food for other pets, but Roxanne Eaton said, "The bottom dropped out of the feeder business years ago. We don't fool with them too much anymore."

### A full-time family business

The hatchery consists primarily of ponds which dot the rolling fields of the farm, and a couple of structures which provide office space, salesroom and space for sorting the young fish as they are caught. Today, in acreage alone, the Eaton's Fish Hatchery remains one of the largest operations in the area.

The ponds, Eaton said,



—RICHARD D. L. FULTON / THE DISPATCH

**Eaton's Fish Hatchery owners Stephen and Roxanne Eaton, along with daughter Tanzy Logue, joined in this photo by one of the family's dogs, pose in front of one of their breeding ponds. Operated strictly as a family business, the hatchery was established by Stephen Eaton's grandfather. The facility shuts down in October, and the fish hibernate in the ponds for the winter.**

are mainly for breeding. After breeding, the various fish are trapped and taken to a building devoted to sorting, which, Tanzy said, is a prolonged process given the thousands of young fish brought in from the ponds.

Once sorted, the stock is taken to holding tanks in the sales room where customers can select the fish they want to add to their ponds or collection. The clientele consists of private property owners, landscapers, pet shops, such as Gettys Pet, and major merchants, such as Maryland Aquatic, Eaton

stated, noting that they sell both wholesale and retail.

He said he doesn't really know how many fish are at the hatchery at any given time. It's likely that the numbers are in the hundreds of thousands, counting hatchlings.

The family hatchery does not generally advertise, but relies on "word of mouth" to acquire new customers. Not a get-rich-quick kind of business, Roxanne Eaton said it "pays the bills," but can be labor-intensive, and only their family of three works the hatchery.

She noted that the biggest expense in keeping the fish is the food, with medicines and pond fertilizer coming in second and third among the expenses. "They (vast numbers of fish) can be a lot of trouble," she said.

### Buying fish or fishing for them

The Eaton's Fish Hatchery is located at 1071 Putnam Road,

phone number (301) 898-7578.

Business hours from April 1 through Aug. 31 are 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. every weekday except Thursday, and 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekends. In September, the hatchery is not open on weekends; and the business is closed from Oct. 1 until April 1.

Eaton's also offers an opportunity to catch fish for the dinner table (no, not the goldfish) or for the sport. Eight of the hatchery's ponds are now stocked with channel catfish, bluegill, crappie and large mouth bass strictly to provide a fishing experience to visitors or enthusiasts.

For those without the appropriate equipment, the hatchery also rents fishing poles and some tackle. Because the ponds are on private property, no fishing license is needed.

Fees to fish are \$8 for adults and \$5 for children. Those children under 16 may not fish without adult supervision.

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