

Shapin' Up the Ol' Fishin' Hole

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Farm ponds with sizes varying from one-quarter to several acres exist throughout Virginia. In many cases these ponds are merely considered part of the overall landscape or a convenient watering area for livestock. In actuality, they offer a tremendous potential for recreational as well as economic benefits. Landowners with ponds may reap the added benefits of recreational fishing in their own backyard! A pond can also provide good places for picnicking, camping, swimming, and general relaxation.

Many ponds are considered undesirable for fish production and recreation because they have always supported populations of stunted fish: a situation caused by an imbalance of the fish species in the pond. In most cases the imbalance is due to an overpopulation of fish resulting in large numbers of very small individuals. Proper fisheries management can convert poorly balanced ponds to good production and provide large, healthy fish. Even a small pond of a half-acre, if properly managed, may provide a family with a meal or two of fish each week throughout the year. Farm ponds may be expected to yield from one hundred to several hundred pounds of fish per acre per year.

Most Virginia ponds are stocked with a combination of bluegill and largemouth bass at a rate of about 50 bass and 500 bluegill per surface acre. If additional yield is desired a farm pond may be fertilized. Once a pond is stocked with bass and bluegill, no additional stocking will be necessary, just a continued yearly harvest to keep populations at desired levels. The mistake most often made with bass-bluegill ponds is the overharvest of bass, and/or underharvest of bluegill which allows an over-production of bluegill and thus, stunting. Stunting results in large numbers of small fish that are undesirable for eating and sport fishing.

The majority of ponds in Virginia are of the type classified as "warmwater" environments. These ponds reach a temperature from 80° to over 90° during the summer months. Fish that may be stocked successfully in these ponds include largemouth bass, bluegill, redear sunfish, and channel catfish. A qualified fisheries scientist should be consulted as to stocking rates and recommended species combinations for individual ponds. Your county extension agent should be contacted initially to locate professional assistance in your area.

Ideally, a pond should be free of rooted aquatic vegetation and should have steep sides of approximately 60-degrees to insure limited vegetation growth along the edges. Ponds should be kept free of other types of fish as they may compete with the desired fish and cause population imbalance. Old ponds that have partially filled in with silt may be drained to remove unwanted fish; their sides may be dug out, and the pond may be deepened. If draining a pond is not possible, the unwanted fish may be eradicated chemically and the pond restocked to establish proper balance, which will start the pond on its way back to good fish production. Before treating a pond with a fish toxicant, a certified fisheries scientist should be consulted to determine the type and amount of chemical to be used.

In order for a pond to be a recreational benefit it must be well managed on a continuous basis. A properly managed pond cannot be fished out! The management of the watershed is often as important as the management of the pond itself. Ponds must be protected from erosion as silt may cause filling, high turbidity, and an increase in rooted aquatic plant growth. Areas prone to erosion should be planted with a good vegetative cover, and ponds should be fenced wherever possible to keep out livestock. Muddy water decreases the productivity of a pond by limiting fish food production.

Pond owners may receive free information on pond management and construction from county extension agents or the Soil Conservation Service. In many cases only minimal input is needed to put a pond back into production as a good recreational resource. Farmers can build and maintain small fish ponds with every day farm equipment and materials. Erosion and weed control are not difficult and easily conform with good farming practices.

Local ponds and farm ponds should not be taken for granted. They deserve a closer look - they may be capable of delivering many enjoyable hours of fishing!

