

# BASS BENEATH THE BIG TOP?

by Kristy Hill

## Use Kristy's advice to train your fish to be the star of your pond!

Here's a quick pop quiz: the correct definition of bass is 1. A North American fish with spiny fins, or 2. A North American fish with circus talent. Surprisingly, they are both true, and no, this isn't another fish tale!

Bass is a name given to several kinds of game fish which live in both tropical and temperate waters around America. Freshwater bass, living in lakes and rivers, are kinds of sunfish known as black bass. The star of this show is a species of black bass known as largemouth bass, but called Shamu, the 'killer' bass, by its fans.

Once upon a time, five years ago, to be exact, a bass fisherman (and also manager of an Atlanta area Pike's Nursery) named Allen Schultz, contacted outdoor enthusiast (and owner of Davis Creek Nursery), Steve Stroupe. The question posed was simply, "What would happen if a bass were put in my fish pond?" The answer? No more goldfish. Bass are voracious predators which will eat minnows, frogs, or angleworms.

Allen discovered his bass would not only eat worms but could be trained to jump for them. Think this sounds a little fishy? It's not! All that

is required is some patience, a bass, worms, and a little training know-how.

First of all, realize that any goldfish the same size or smaller will be eaten. Apparently, it's a fish-eat-fish world out there. Secondly, you need a bass, but you must have the right kind—*Micropterus salmoides*, or largemouth bass. While smallmouth bass, *Micropterus dolomieu*, are smaller, and for this reason seem more agile, they prefer Northern lakes and cool, clear streams. Garden ponds in the South are hot and are thus more suited to the largemouth bass. It loves the quiet waters of a lake and will typically grow to 6 to 8 pounds; but as we Southerners well know, they occasionally exceed twenty pounds in our parts. Generally, the ideal size for your bass is in the 1/2 to 1 pound range. Perhaps you can teach a big, old bass new tricks, but as with other animals, it is easier with a small young one. (This training method has been tried on a five-pound bass, but it did not work.)

Next, you need an incentive. Bass don't have a pocket for tips, but they'll work for food. Obtain a plentiful supply of earthworms. They are easy to find under plant containers or by turning over a shovelful of soil in your garden.

Begin by allowing your bass to acclimate to its new surroundings. Put the fish on a regular feeding schedule, just as you would goldfish and koi.

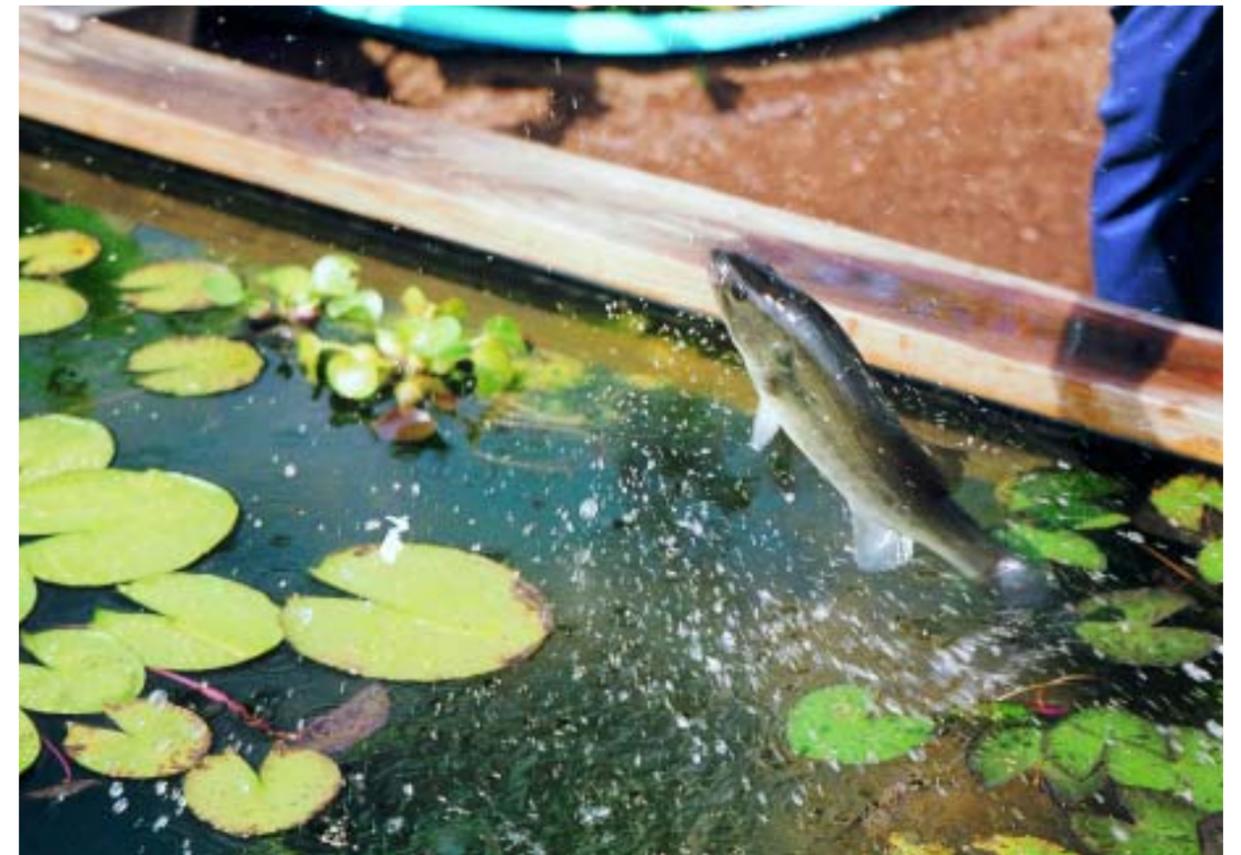
At first, simply toss worms into the pond. Once it has taken the worms, start making the fish travel closer to you to get them. Pick a corner of the pond or any consistent, designated area so that you can feed the fish from this position everyday at roughly the same time. Soon, your mere presence in that spot elicits a Pavlovian learning response. The fish will know it's time to eat!

In the next stage, dangle the worms in the water. Caution: bass are a powerful fish and have sharp 'teeth,' so you should watch your fingers and select long worms. Once the bass is familiar with the dangling dinner and your hand, gradually start raising the meal incrementally over a

period of time. Ultimately, after successful training, the fish will leap up, arching its long, plain colored body, and grab its reward in the air. This has been accomplished at a maximum height between 1 1/2 to 2 feet. It has even been done using a ring. To our knowledge, no one has yet tried a flaming hoop, which is probably best.

So go ahead! Head out to your favorite fishin' hole, leave the cornmeal at home, and rather than boast about the one that got away, hook them with the one *you* trained to play. ♡

*Kristy Hill is the nursery manager at Davis Creek Nursery in McCalla, AL.*



Stuart Myers of Myers Plants and Pottery in Pelham, Alabama, successfully trained his pet bass. Photo by Stuart Myers