

## Managing the Mini-Pond

# Think Small— in a Big Way

By Bob Lusk

I love being around Mike Otto. He's funny, hard-working, diligent, a little bit gruff, and gets things done. He has to, he's an earthmover. That's what they do.

His natural sense of humor makes it easy to hear his philosophies and his train of thought. Plus, he has a magical way of drilling down to the simple side of the truth.

Some of the lessons I've learned from Mike can relate to the advice I'm about to offer for managing small ponds.

Years ago, Otto told me about a landowner from the city who bought a heavily-wooded property along the river. He brought Mike over and told him which trees he wanted bulldozed, piled and burned, and which trees to leave alone. Otto obliged him.

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The remaining trees struggled for a few years, some of them died, others looked distressed and others seemed to do fine. The landowner happily mowed the acreage. He'd basically had Otto build a park.

A few years later, a family bought some land on the prairie and asked Otto if he'd build a road, a house pad, help with fencing, and plant a few trees. Sure, he'd be happy to help. He did his part and years later he found out they'd been planting more and more trees over their prairie land. Ten years later, that property looked completely different.

Seems like a pretty normal thought pattern, doesn't it?

Until Mike Otto looks you dead straight in the eye and says, "I don't know why that first



*Sorting tilapia. We used cages to sort fish before moving them indoors.*



*The tank set-up for over-wintering our tilapia.*



*The bio-filter with a grow light to assist sprouting some greenery in a raft floating on top.*



*Harvesting the tilapia with a 100 foot seine.*

guy didn't just buy himself a park and the second group go buy a forest."

His point was right on. By the time the first guy had the forest thinned with a bulldozer and the second set of folks planted all those trees, they'd spent enough money and time to have shopped and bought what they wanted in the first place. Not to mention the fact they were making

giant ecological changes to the environment of the property they bought.

What's that got to do with mini-ponds?

Plenty.

Small ponds do what small ponds do. Sure, you can push them to be way bigger than they really are, but understand what you have. They're still small. If you want a mini-pond to act bigger, be

prepared to help it every way you can.

For example, we decided to put together a recirculating system inside our workshop to hold tilapia over winter. The insulated building is heated with a small electric heater and a wood stove. Part of the project is to add on a hydroponic garden and make an aquaponic system, using wastewater from the recirculating system and its tilapia providing food for the greenery.

But, we needed to be able to produce enough tilapia to make the venture pay.

That's where our mini-ponds come in. We've got two 1/10 acre ponds, about 50 feet wide and 90 feet long. They are side by side. Each has a drain and each can be filled with our well. Each is aerated and has an automatic feeder. Keeping the water clean and healthy is the biggest issue. Last spring, in May, we stocked about 12-15 adult *Tilapia mozambique* into each pond. We kept the water fertile, but one of the ponds filled with algae. Over summer, we kept the aeration system moving and we'd exchange some water from time to time to keep it from becoming overwhelmed by fish production. The tilapia wiped out the algae and that pond turned a nice, fertile shade of green. We kept the feeders full, and fed the fish faithfully. Then, in October, we harvested fish. Each pond yielded close to 400 pounds of tilapia. One pond had fewer numbers of fish, but

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they were larger. That north pond, we call it, had fish mostly 4-6" long. The south pond had 1500 fish in the 3-5" size range, but I bet we harvested another 20,000 little fish, in the 1-2" size range. Quite a few of those we sent to another aquaponic facility for rearing. But, we brought in about 650 pounds of tilapia to keep and raise over the winter. Our mission is to sell most of these fish next spring, eat a few and keep a few for this spring's

brood fish. All this while we figure out the best aquaponic growing system for our property and our management style.

My biggest point here is that these two mini-ponds did big things for us during the growing season of 2013. Since fish culture is a big part of my life, that's where the focus of these two mini-ponds lies. After we harvested the tilapia in October, I knew there were still quite a few babies



*Here is some of the average-size tilapia inside our facility.*

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left over—those fish too small to stay inside a 3/8" mesh seine. So, we bought 500 2-4" hybrid striped bass and split them between the two ponds. My hope is that they've eaten the remaining tilapia babies, will continue to feed as the feeders pitch out their nutritious offerings, and we'll get some fish growth over a fairly mild Texas winter. Then, when we are ready to re-stock the tilapia in spring, we'll harvest the hybrid stripers, bring them indoors and keep the recirculating system going to fuel the aquaponics system. A double crop of fish with a secondary mission of fueling plant growth.

The mini-ponds play a big role in what we intend to do with aquaponics. They'll provide the stock and we'll provide the management.

So, what does that have to do with your mini-pond? We've figured out the limits of what our small ponds can do well. We've tried to grow big bass, we've played with fish genetics, we've grown nice bluegill—all this in these two small ponds. By far, the best results we've gotten have been with tilapia. By far.

Have some fun with your mini-ponds. Figure out what they'll let you do. More important, figure out what you *shouldn't* do with them.

I've learned from the Mike Otto school of common sense. Now, when someone calls Otto, especially those who are looking for land, he'll tell them, "If you want a park, buy a park."

That same advice holds true with small waters. Don't fight against what you can't do with small waters. Figure out what you can do...and do it.