

Setting up an Aquarium

Common beginner mistakes

This issue, we called on the specialists and our mates at Australian Aquarium Magazine--the leading publication on slippery little suckers--to help us readers understand the most common mistakes people make when entering the watery world of fish fancying.

Publisher Alex Cooney writes:

When starting Australian Aquarium Magazine my partner and I spent many hours researching aquariums and talking with aquarium shop owners and customers. Many of them like myself initially started with a small family goldfish aquarium. Most unfortunately learnt the hard way and have only succeeded due to persistence, fascination and keen interest.

DON'T

1 - Do not set the aquarium up on an unstable surface.

A bookshelf may sag or warp under the weight of the aquarium (each litre of water weighs around one kilogram). On top of electrical equipment is also a bad idea, i.e. microwaves and speakers.

2 - Do not set the aquarium up in direct sunlight.

Avoid window sills, near a window, a sun room, pretty much anywhere the aquarium is going to get direct sunlight--you're just asking for an aquarium full of green soup!

3 - Do not set the aquarium up in an area of heavy traffic.

Avoid hallways, next to the front door, anywhere there is a regular, heavy flow of people. The vibrations and movement from passing people will make the fish hide all the time, causing them to become stressed and unhappy. And an unhappy fish is not a long lived one!

4 - Do not place aquariums in young children's bedrooms.

Wait until the child is at least six or seven and ensure rules are laid down i.e. no unsupervised feeding and no putting objects into the aquarium. Children should not have an aquarium in their bedroom. My sister found her four year old playing with his goldfish with his bare hands on the table. He said the fish was bored and wanted to play!

5 - Do not add too many fish at once.

New aquariums do not have sufficient levels of good aerobic bacteria (Nitrosomonas and Nitrobacters) to break down high levels of waste from fish. Basically, fish will poison themselves if you add too many at once. It is better to add fish slowly over a period of around two to three months, adding around one to two fish per 20 liters each week.

6 - Do not overcrowd/overstock the aquarium.

A good general rule of thumb is one inch of fish per one inch of aquarium length, although as mentioned this is just a general rule of thumb and can not be applied in all situations, for example you could not put two twelve inch fish into a twenty-four inch aquarium. Just use your common sense, and do not be scared to ask the staff for information when purchasing fish.

7 - Never change 100% of the water

This rids all the good bacteria in your aquarium and will probably lead to increased waste levels. It is like starting again with a new tank, and if you have a tank full of fish, this is bad news. Better to change smaller amounts regularly. Around 30% of the water should be changed around every 3-4 weeks depending on the amount of waste being produced.

8 - Do not overfeed your fish.

It's the fastest way to kill fish and the most common. Feed daily but ONLY what they consume in 2 minutes. After this ALL the food should be gone; you should not be able to see any chunks of food at all. Also do not use chunky or coarse gravel as it traps food lets it rot and pollute the aquarium, fine gravel no coarser than 5-6mm is best.

9 - Do not spray air fresheners or aerosols near the aquarium.

Even if you have a hood on your aquarium, bug sprays, air fresheners, perfume and deodorant still make their way into the water by small gaps can be highly toxic to the inhabitants.



DO

1 - Know the volume of your aquarium.

It's essential to know litre amount when adding medications, plant fertilisers, water conditioners, salts etc. Don't forget that gravel and decorations will displace some water giving you a lesser amount.

2 - Wash your hands before putting them into the aquarium.

Chemicals, moisturisers, skin and grease all make their way into our aquariums via our hands harming the inhabitants.

3 - Turn off all the power, heaters etc, before putting your hands into the aquarium.

Aquarium equipment is designed to function underwater, and should not be a problem unless it is faulty. For this reason it is best to unplug all heaters, pumps and filters inside the aquarium before immersing your hands in the water.

4 - Test the water often.

It is the first step in trouble shooting if you have a problem or are changing water. Testing tells more about the water than pH level such as if excess phosphate and nitrate are the cause of our unwanted algae. Find out what levels of toxic wastes are in the water--ammonia, nitrite-- and how much calcium or iron is in the water for reef and planted aquaria.

5 - Maintain a stable temperature

Check the temperature regularly if a tropical aquarium.

Optimum temperature for tropical fish is around 26 °C. Keep temperature stable with an aquarium heater. Check it with a thermometer daily. In summer, aquariums can overheat. A chiller may be needed if you are keeping corals. Remember that even Bettas (Siamese fighting fish) need heaters in winter.

6 - Add conditioned tap water to your aquarium

Tap water contains Chlorine and Ammonia (Chloramines), added to kill the nasty bugs that might make us sick but it will also kill pet fish. Toxic Chloramines are easily neutralised with liquid water conditioner or 'water ager'. Tap water is devoid of the natural salts found in the rivers and creeks. It is recommended to add an aquarium electrolyte salt to tap water to replenish natural minerals required for good health.

7 - Choose the right size aquarium for the species of fish you want to keep

Don't make the mistake of buying an unsuitably sized aquarium for the fish you are going to purchase. The little Oscar in the tank at the shop might just look really cute, but is highly unsuitable if you only have a two foot, or 50L aquarium which it will outgrow. Find out the maximum size of fish species you want to keep, and what size tank to house particular species.

8 - Select compatible fish species.

Research the fish want to keep, what goes well with them, their needs and if you meet those needs easily. Some fish (seahorses) only eat frozen food needing several daily feedings. Other fish won't tolerate each other in the same aquarium and will fight.

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