

FINNED AND FASCINATING

Fish Make Appealing Family Pets

by Randy Kambic

An aquarium
decorates the house.
It's also constant
theater, with the fish
being the actors.

~ Ron Elander, owner,
Octopuss Garden

Fish aquariums are colorful and wondrous windows to the sea, showcasing continuous movement, yet evoking tranquility. A mainstay in many workplaces, restaurants, hospitals and physicians' offices, these watery habitats weave their greatest influence when

adopted into a home with children.

The 2011-2012 American Pet Products Association Pet

Owner Survey reports that 11.9 million U.S. households now own freshwater fish (another 700,000 have saltwater pets). While exotic species offer great appeal, freshwater fish are less expensive in many cases and require less equipment in terms of pumps and power heads to create water currents. Careful and thoughtful planning can start ownership off in fine finned fashion.

Getting Started

The number of fish desired should dictate the size of the tank. *Hartz.com* suggests one inch of fish for every 1.5 to two gallons in tank size. Mindy Dobrow, owner of Brookline Grooming & Pet Supplies, in Massachusetts, notes, "Most new owners that want to take

the hobby seriously get 30- to 50-gallon tanks." She suggests once-daily feedings or, "If you want more interaction with the fish, half as much, twice a day. If you feed at set times, the fish will quickly learn and

be ready." To provide a relaxed environment for aquarium life and reduce algae growth, select a tank location in a low-traffic area, away from windows.

According to Dobrow, a first freshwater collection of colorful species that usually coexist well could include angelfish, discus, clown loach, African cichlids and fancy goldfish. "They're all fun and pretty," she comments.

Aquarium shop owner Ron Elander, of Octopuss Garden, in San Diego, concurs. For fresh startups, he recommends including several kinds of African cichlids because, "They chase each other around a good deal and are interesting to watch." He also likes angelfish, which he characterizes as docile and elegant.

A modern water filtration system is needed to eliminate fish waste and uneaten food that can decay and contaminate the water. Elander warns against showing too much love by overfeeding. "Excess food settles on the bottom, decays and

is eaten later; we get sick eating rotten food and so will fish."

Make frequent partial water changes—one-third of the total every two to four weeks, depending on the number of fish and tank size, according to Dobrow—because filtering alone cannot do the job.

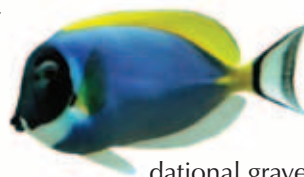
Have the household tap water tested for pH (a measure of acidity and alkalinity) in order to know which chemicals are needed to sustain the level between 7.7 and 8.3, again depending on the fish population and tank size. Use LED lights, energy-saving water filters and a heater with built-in thermostat control (to maintain a range between 75° and 82° Fahrenheit) in order to reduce electric utility costs.

Creative decorating atop the tank's foundational gravel base adds to the fun. Make sure anything manmade, such as a model sunken ship or treasure chest, is obtained from a pet store, so it won't rust or degrade and contaminate the water. Shells, coral and plants also add to a maritime setting. Remember, the more plants installed, the more light (and electricity) is needed to keep them alive.

Health Benefits

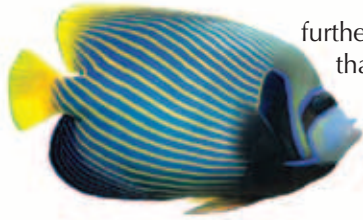
AnimalPlanet.com attests that watching fish lowers respiration and pulse rates, relieves tension and provides relief from stresses. "Children can forge a deep connection and obtain a delayed gratification in tending fish that can be a maturing experience," says Medical Doctor Archana Lal-Tabak, who practices integrative medicine, holistic psychiatry, Ayurveda and homeopathy at the Heart of Transformation Wellness Institute, in Evanston, Illinois.

She stresses that fish ownership should be a family experience at the beginning, so that children take their responsibility seriously; it also naturally leads to eagerly anticipated visits to natural waterways.



Lal-Tabak particularly recommends this hobby for children with attention deficit symptoms, because, "Watching fish can slow children down and allow them to appreciate being in the present moment."

A discreet correlation exists between witnessing the compatibility of different species and human potential. Seeing a world of multicolored fish represents a harmonious diversity for a discerning person of any age.



Elander further notes that some

fish characteristics make them particularly well suited as pets for the older set. "They don't bark and you don't have to take them out for a walk on a cold morning," he says with a grin.



Find more information in the Marine Aquarium Handbook: Beginner to Breeder, by Martin A. Moe, Jr.

Animal lover Randy Kambic is an Estero, FL, freelance writer and editor and a frequent contributor to Natural Awakenings.



WATCH LIST

Common Fish Ailments

Fish illnesses can usually be prevented via proper maintenance and feeding. If suspect behavior or appearance arises, discuss with an expert pet retailer what steps might help, including use of specific liquid medications following manufacturer's dosage instructions.

Ammonia poisoning. High ammonia levels can accumulate when an owner sets up a new tank or adds too many new fish simultaneously. Symptoms to watch for include red or purple gills or fish gasping for breath at the surface. Use a freshwater aquarium neutralizer solution and a 50 percent water change. For prevention, stock the tank slowly, avoid overfeeding, remove uneaten food and conduct regular partial water changes.

Columnaris. This bacterial infection, showing as mold-like lesions, is caused by poor water quality and inadequate diet. Highly contagious among fish, a mixture of penicillin and formalin is often recommended. A complete tank cleaning can prevent re-infection.



Fin Rot. Frayed and white fin edges indicate the presence of this bacterial disease. A combination of formaldehyde, malachite green, methylene blue and/or penicillin, plus a complete tank cleaning, should remedy the problem.

Ich. White spots or red streaks typically signify this potentially fatal skin infection of a fish stressed by poor diet or an unclean habitat. Copper sulfate or formalin can destroy all parasites and carrier cysts.



Sources: Illness descriptions, Hartz.com; medications, Ron Elander, owner, Octopuss Garden, San Diego.