

Aquarium Costs: What it Takes to Run a Healthy, Successful Freshwater Fish Aquarium

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The joy of setting up and properly maintaining a freshwater aquarium is one that is experienced by an increasing number of people every year. A new aquarium owner might be lulled into thinking that a small aquarium is inexpensive, low maintenance, and requires very little time. While you can certainly try to operate an aquarium under these assumptions, it probably will not be successful, your fish will not thrive and may die, and you will not enjoy it nearly as much as you would if you did it correctly. While you may be tempted to purchase a \$99.00 starter kit that includes 'everything you need,' you should be aware that there are many more expenses involved as well as a serious time commitment on your part.

The purpose of this article is not to discourage you from starting an aquarium, but to make you aware of the cost and commitment required in running a healthy and successful aquarium. As a veterinarian, one of my pursuits is to ensure that every animal receives adequate, humane care. This also includes fish. Because fish can not verbalize their needs and we are not able to 'touch' them, as well as the fact that many people consider fish as lower life forms, their welfare is often neglected. The old adage "if a fish dies we'll just get a new one" has no business in the language of the modern fish keeper. Study after study has shown that these creatures possess advanced nervous systems and feel pain and suffering just as much as their mammalian counterparts. If potential aquarium owners are not willing to acknowledge this and are not committed to the fish's well being first and foremost, then they are not ready to keep fish. An aquarium should not be viewed as a decoration but as a living, biological environment that provides a healthy, safe refuge for the fish that live there. A well maintained, healthy aquarium becomes an object of beauty. A poorly maintained aquarium is an eyesore and the cause of death for the unlucky fish inhabitants.

The cost of running an aquarium is important because if an aquarium owner is not willing to invest the necessary money and time in doing it right, then the fish will suffer and die as a result. The following cost chart takes into account only the basic cost of a small to medium sized freshwater tank. Salt-water tanks are for experts only and costs for freshwater tanks are a fraction of a salt-water setup. The cost of your time is not taken into consideration here. Setting up and maintaining a tank is a hobby and a joy. If you look at tank maintenance as an unpleasant chore, then you will not spend enough time maintaining it and therefore have an unhealthy tank, and should consider a different hobby. The price listed is for a 29-gallon tank, which is a great starter size. Tanks smaller than 12 gallons are not suitable for most freshwater set-ups and should be reserved for hospital or quarantine tanks. If you enjoy your aquarium, you will soon find yourself 'needing' a larger tank and the cost will go up accordingly.

Item	Cost
Tank	\$100.00
Stand	\$85.00
Fish	\$70.00
Light/Hood	\$35.00
Gravel	\$15.00
Food	\$10.00
Plants (plastic/real)	\$35.00
Heater	\$15.00
Filter	\$40.00
Filter Cartridges (1 year)	\$43.00
Carbon	\$7.00
Chlorine Reducer	\$5.00
Ph/Ammonia Test Kit	\$8.50

Net	\$6.00
Replacement Bulbs (1 year)	\$20.00
Thermometer	\$3.00
Medication	\$15.00
Driftwood/Rock	\$45.00
Algae Scraper	\$6.00
Siphon	\$8.00
Total:	\$571.50

The list of items and their corresponding costs are accurate estimates for what it recently cost me to set up a 29-gallon tank. I could have spent much more on fish and equipment, but not much less. A 75-gallon tank, which is a popular medium sized tank, could easily cost twice the amount to purchase and set up. This price assumes that your fish and plants stay healthy. If you need to treat and replace them, realize that your cost could go higher and there are many little things that I will probably need throughout the year that I have not included in the cost.

As this price chart shows, even a small, simple tank is a big investment and the fish only represent a small part of the initial cost. However, if you do not spend the time and money to buy quality equipment, your fish will do poorly and die. Fish tanks are often purchased as a hobby or novelty for children. But as you can see, the cost and expertise are way beyond a child's capability or interest and the tank must be primarily funded and maintained by an interested adult. Children love and can benefit from a well-maintained tank and often enjoy participating in the care of the fish, but should never be solely responsible for the maintenance and care of these delicate creatures.

In summary, once you are aware of the cost and time commitment needed to properly care for an aquarium you can begin researching the inhabitants of your future tank. Design your tank with the fish in mind. Provide lots of plants, hiding places, and the correct water chemistry. Start slowly and let your tank 'age' for a couple of weeks before you add fish. Choose the right kind of fish that work well together and read everything you can get your hands on. Never accept the death of a fish as normal and strive for the healthiest, most well maintained tank possible. Then sit back and enjoy the real beauty of the special company of these happy, healthy living creatures.