Driftwood: How to Prepare, Cure, and Place Driftwater in Your Freshwater Aquarium

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Adding natural structures such as driftwood to your aquarium requires some preparation and thought to bring out their best aesthetic qualities. Driftwood and other natural structures may make up a large portion of your aquarium. Any adjustments needed can cause significant stress, and in some cases, require taking apart the aquarium and starting all over. Do it right the first time. With a bit of planning, you can have a beautifully aquascaped aquarium with minimal effort and disturbance.

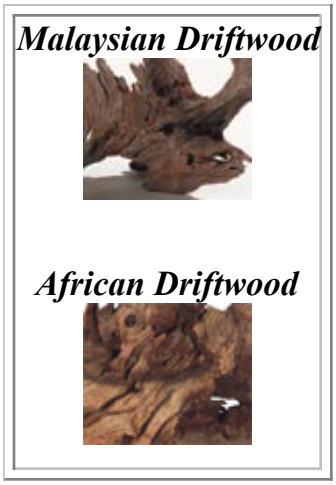
In preparation

Before placing the driftwood in your aquarium, draw a rough sketch of your aquarium and where you want to locate the driftwood. Consider how your aquarium will look with the driftwood positioned vertically as opposed to the conventional horizontal position. Explore different designs on paper to create a unique aquatic landscape. Drawing a rough sketch allows you to experiment and visualize your aquascape without disturbing your aquarium inhabitants in the process.

Cleaning driftwood

After determining where to place the driftwood, it needs to be cleaned before placement. Use a clean brush to scrub the driftwood thoroughly to remove any dirt or debris. Do not use soap or any chemical cleansers. Any residue will poison your aquarium. The cleaned driftwood will then need to be soaked to saturate and "cure."

Curing driftwood



Though most driftwood will remain submerged underwater, some driftwood remains slightly buoyant until it is fully saturated and "waterlogged." Soak the driftwood in a large bucket as long as possible making sure the entire piece is completely underwater. A minimum period of 1 to 2 weeks is recommended to allow total saturation.

Soaking also allows excess tannins that can darken and discolor the water, to leach out. The discoloration caused by the tannins will not harm your aquarium inhabitants, but it will lower the pH slightly over time. Some hobbyists take advantage of this feature and utilize the tannins to achieve soft water conditions preferred by many tropical fish.

Monitor the soaking driftwood regularly to see if the water needs to be changed. As the water darkens, empty all of the water and gently rinse the driftwood. Fill the bucket with clean dechlorinated or reverse osmosis (RO) water and continue soaking the driftwood. As you repeat this process, you will notice that the water will be less "tea-stained." When you no longer notice any significant discoloration for several days in a row, the driftwood is ready for placement.

Boiling driftwood

Boiling driftwood has several benefits. Just like steeping a tea bag in hot water, boiling driftwood in a large stockpot encourage more tannins to leach out faster, thereby shortening the curing process. More importantly, boiling sterilizes the driftwood, killing algal or fungal spores that can take hold once introduced into the aquarium with the driftwood. Boiling the driftwood for 1-2 hours will sterilize the driftwood.

Placement

Once the driftwood has been properly prepared, it is ready for placement. Refer to the sketches you made earlier to place the driftwood in the ideal location. The most convenient time to arrange your aquatic landscape is after you have removed some water during a water change. Simply place the driftwood into your aquarium and refill. With a bit of patience and some planning, you can create a beautiful aquatic landscape the first time with minimal stress to you and your aquarium inhabitants.

Things to consider:

- When purchasing driftwood, make sure it is safe for aquarium use. Driftwood sold for reptiles may look ideal for aquariums but it may contain chemicals harmful to fish.
- Though tempting, avoid using wood or roots found outdoors. Oftentimes, these pieces have not dried or cured properly and can rot when placed in your aquarium.
- Large pieces of driftwood, even thoroughly soaked, can still retain buoyancy. Secure large pieces of driftwood to rocks with monofilament (fishing line) to anchor them.

- Plants such as Java Moss or Java Fern can be attached to driftwood to create an aged "natural look." Loosely secure the plants with monofilament line. The fishing line can be removed once the plants have naturally attached and grown into the driftwood.
- Even after the curing/soaking process, some driftwood may still release tannins and discolor the water. Use chemical filter media such as Purigen or activated carbon to clarify your water.
- The "tea-stained" effect caused by driftwood simulates Amazonian "Black Water" biotopes where many brightly colored Tetras like Neons, Cardinals, Rummynoses, and Bleeding Hearts live. If this is your preference, then only a short soak and scrub is necessary before adding driftwood to your aquarium.