Feeding Invertebrates and Corals in Your Saltwater Aquarium

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Over the past decade, advancements in the marine hobby have made raising some of the more delicate invertebrates and corals in captivity easier than ever. One of these advancements is in nutrition. As our knowledge of invertebrate and coral nutrition increases, so does the number of commercially available foods. This can leave the hobbyist overwhelmed by choices.

Invertebrates in their natural habitat

In the wild, invertebrates and corals eat plankton. There are many species of plankton, but the most important ones to supplement in your marine aquarium are phytoplankton and zooplankton.

Phytoplankton are plant-based and very tiny, and are preferred by filter-feeding invertebrates and corals that have feathery-like appendages or gills. Feather duster worms, scallops, clams, and gorgonians with small polyps are perfect examples of reef inhabitants that require this nutrition for survival and growth.

Zooplankton represent the animal portion of the plankton group. They are much larger in size than phytoplankton and their size varies dramatically within this group. Invertebrates and corals that feed on zooplankton typically have larger polyps that do not resemble feathers. Invertebrates that feed on zooplankton in the wild include: soft corals, zooanthids, mushroom corals, SPS and LPS corals, large polyp gorgonians, anemones, and many species of crustaceans including shrimp, crabs, and lobsters.

What this means for your aquarium

When designing a feeding regimen for your aquarium, research the nutritional needs of all of its inhabitants.

Available forms of phytoplankton

Phytoplankton is available in both liquid and powder forms. Products such as PhytoPlan, Phytoplex, and Chromaplex will all help you recreate the natural nutrition of your phytoplankton-eating invertebrates. Ideally, a variety of types - we suggest two or more - is necessary for a balanced diet.

Available forms of zooplankton

Zooplankton is available in both liquid and frozen form. ZooPlex Invertebrate Food is a liquid supplement that provides the necessary nutrition for zooplankton- eating invertebrates and some fish. Frozen forms include: Baby Brine Shrimp, Daphnia, Fine Mussels chopped or ground into the size needed for your inhabitants, Brine Shrimp, Mysis Shrimp and Ocean Plankton. These different foods cover a broad range of particle size. As with any diet, provide a variety to best suit your inhabitants' needs.

Feeding plankton to your aquarium inhabitants

When feeding plankton foods, turn your protein skimmer off, and remove any mechanical filtration that may trap the food from the water column. Ideally, feed these foods by mimicking the natural plankton cycle. Feed phytoplankton throughout the daylight hours and zooplankton at night. Other convenient choices for feeding are the use of prepared food in a dosing system, or a hang on continuous brine shrimp hatchery (only use a hatchery that prevents water exchange between hatchery and aquarium, like the Hatch N' Feeder). When using either, the protein skimmer can be left running, as it will ensure that you are not over-feeding.

By following these feeding recommendations, you will ensure that your corals and invertebrates are receiving the proper nutrition, resulting in overall improved health and a more rapid growth and reproduction rate.

Summary tips:

1. Research the nutritional and dietary needs of your aquarium inhabitants.
2. Phytoplankton and zooplankton are the most important plankton supplements for a marine aquarium.
3. Provide a variety of plankton to best suit your inhabitants' needs.
4. Mimic nature and feed phytoplankton during the day and zooplankton at night.
5. Turn off your protein skimmer when feeding plankton.

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