How to Choose the Right Fish for Your Freshwater Aquarium

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Most beginning aquarium owners are soon overwhelmed with the large number and variety of decisions required when setting up a new aquarium. The owner must decide on the type, size, and location of the tank; whether it will be freshwater or saltwater; live or plastic plants; types of filters, heaters, lights, and food; and a hundred other technical questions that must be answered for designing a properly operating tank. Unfortunately, the last decision that is often made concerns the type and number of fish that are going to live in the tank. When the owner does decide on buying fish it is often done based on color and appearance. As a result, many new tanks fail to thrive and many fish perish as a result.

Questions to ask when choosing fish

The correct way to set up a new tank (after you are sure a fish tank is right for you) is to first research and decide what type of fish you would like to have in the tank. There are over 25,000 identified species of fish and over 2,000 of these are available to the aquarist. To help narrow down your list of desirable fish, you need to consider all of the following questions about the potential candidates:

1. How big is the fish going to get?
2. If the fish gets large will it prey on or frighten smaller fish in the tank?
3. Is the fish too small to fit in with the other fish in the tank?
4. Is the fish territorial and will it require a large space of its own?
5. Does the fish eat other fish? Many tropical fish do.
6. Does it nip the fins of other fish?
7. Is it aggressive or is it too shy and nervous to live with certain other species?
8. Does it eat live plants?
9. Does it dig in the bottom of the tank?
10. What kind of water does it require (pH, hardness, temperature, etc.)?
11. Is it available where you live?
12. What does it cost?
13. Is it raised domestically or taken out of the wild?
14. Does this particular fish need to live in groups or prefer to live alone?

Once you have decided what fish you would like to have in your tank, then the rest of the decisions will fall into place much easier. One of the most important steps to take is to build the aquarium around the chosen fish species, not the other way around. You will be much more successful and have healthier fish if you build your aquarium around the needs of the fish rather than around your desire to have an attractive tank. If you create an aquarium where the needs of the individual fish in the tank are placed first, it will be both healthy and beautiful.

The type, size, and location of the tank will be tailored to best suit the species of fish you choose. The filtering and heating choices will be based on the type of fish you choose. The plants, lighting, food source, substrate choice will all be tailored to provide the healthiest and most natural environment for your fish species.

Seven categories of aquarium fish

To repeat what I mentioned earlier, there are over 2,000 species of fish available. To help make your search for the right fish easier, the most commonly available tropical fish have been divided into 7 main categories. Each one of these categories contains fish that are similar in many of their traits, however, it should be emphasized that this listing is just an outline and there are often many unique differences between fish in the same family and individual research into each specific species should be done before making your final decision.

Catfish: There are over 2,000 species of catfish each with their own unique characteristics, but as a group none of these fish have scales. They are covered with skin or an armor-like plating. Many catfish are used as scavengers in tanks and while many species are well adapted to this, some have very different eating habits. There is probably a species of catfish that would work well in just about any type of aquarium set up. The important thing is to find the catfish that will work best in your tank. Some things to consider when choosing a catfish are:

- Some catfish can get very large (over seven feet)

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- Some catfish are nocturnal and need to be fed after dark
- Some catfish are specialized feeders and are not scavengers
- Coarse, sharp substrate (gravel) can damage or irritate some of the bottom feeding catfish
- Some catfish need to live in groups

Characiforms (characins, tetras, hatchetfish, pencilfish, splash tetras): This category includes a very large number of fish that are commonly found in Africa and the Americas. Some of the smaller species are very popular in community tanks. Some of the larger ones (piranhas) are more difficult and better suited to experts. Many of these species are wild harvested.

Cichlids: This category consists of a large, very diverse number of fish that are commonly found in Africa, the tropical Americas, and Asia. The bright colors and diversity of habitat common to these species make them popular in many aquariums. The Cichlids all practice parental care, which makes them more territorial. When they are guarding their young or eggs they can be very aggressive towards any other fish in the area and may even guard their nest areas when they are not actively hatching young. This aggression makes most of them better suited to living in tanks where other species of fish are not present. However, some species (dwarf cichlids and angelfish) will live together well in a community tank if the right conditions are provided.

Cypriniforms (barbs, danios, rasboras, 'sharks,' loaches, goldfish, koi): These fish are found in many locations throughout the world and the species include both tropical varieties and coldwater species such as the goldfish. Many of these species are popular in the aquarium because of their hardiness, ease of care, and willingness to breed. Many species are sociable and do well in a community tank.

Cyprinodonts (toothcarps, killifish): These fish are usually small and live and feed near the surface. The toothcarps consist of the egg layers that can be rare and difficult for beginners as well as live bearers that are popular aquarium species such as guppies, mollies, swordtails, and platies.

Labyrinth Fish (gouramis, fighting fish, combtails, paradise fish): This group of fish is very popular with the aquarist. They are generally small, hardy, peaceful fish that are well suited to community aquariums with the exception of some of the aggressive males of the fighting fish, paradise fish, and both sexes of the adult combtails.

Rainbowfish (rainbowfish, silversides): The fish from this family come from a variety of different habitats and the individual needs of each species should be researched. These fish tend to have an iridescent quality to their skin that makes them change colors as they move through the light. Most species are small, peaceful, and colorful, and make good additions to a community tank.

Conclusion

The beginning aquarium owners will be faced with a variety of decisions. If they start with researching the individual fish and their requirements and then build their tank around the needs of the fish, they will be rewarded with a healthy, beautiful aquarium that will provide countless hours of enjoyment.

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