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# General Aquarium Tips

There are so many little tidbits we pick up in this hobby that make our aquarium-keeping lives easier. This list is far from complete, but I will try to list a few things that will make your hobby go more smoothly.

## **Walk softly and carry a good book**

You don't have to study for hundreds of hours to be able to keep a healthy fish tank, but having some resources handy can sure make life easier. Buy a good book and bring it to the fish store when you shop. Most stores will have knowledgeable staff, but sadly this is not always the case. Learn about the fish you are looking at before buying. How large does it grow? What is its aggression level? What temperature and pH does the fish thrive in? What are its dietary needs? Your beautiful planted aquarium will not be pretty for long after you add a few silver dollar fish! Similarly, that Pacu you just bought isn't going to fit in your aquarium very long, even if you have a hundred gallon tank. Better to know these things going in to a purchase.

## **A minute per gallon, per week**

This is a very fluid rule, and really is just to point out that a little frequent maintenance is better than a rare afternoon of hard work. There is no aquarium that doesn't benefit from a 10% water change weekly. This means taking out old dirty water, and replacing it with clean water of the same temperature. Topping off for evaporation is NOT a water change! Take this time to vacuum gravel, scrub down glass, clean the filter, and check that equipment is working properly. Catastrophic tank crashes almost always occur in tanks that are irregularly maintained. The exception to this is poisoning, so never spray Windex or glass cleaners with ammonia near your tank – 5 to 8 parts ammonia to one million parts water is enough to kill most fishes. Also wash hands before putting them in your tank. I've watched entire aquariums full of fish die because someone put hands in them wearing lotion.

## **Make water changes easy**

A simple siphon tube with a gravel washer extension is adequate for small tanks (under 30 gallons or so), but something that hooks up to your faucet that drains and fills will end the days of hauling buckets. For saltwater tanks, use those only to drain and mix your salt mix up in a clean plastic trash can.

## **Algae growth is a good thing (kind of)**

Not much frustrates the new aquarist like nuisance algae. I have a whole paper dedicated to algae (<http://www.blueridgereef.com/care/algae.pdf>), so I won't go into detail here. But bear in mind that it is growing on nitrogen – fish feces, urine, and uneaten food, which would otherwise be dissolved in your water. Make sure no window light reaches your tank and only leave tank lights on for 8 to 10 hours per day. If needed, put lights on an appliance timer.

## **Be prepared!**

The Boy Scout motto is definitely applicable to our hobby. What do you do if there is a prolonged power outage? Depending on your investment in livestock, you may consider a gas powered generator. For smaller systems, a deep cycle battery (found at most boat, auto and RV stores) should be adequate. I would also keep dechlorinator on hand. It is very inexpensive, and has a shelf life of many years. Keep a spare fish net stored away. An investment of less than five bucks will come in handy if your old one tears or disappears. Old fish net mesh also makes an excellent algae scrubber for glass tanks. One thing to keep on hand is good quality carbon, often mistakenly called "charcoal." Next to changing water, there is not much that pulls toxins out of water like activated carbon.

## **Prepare your tank before buying fish!**

Set up your aquarium and get everything running. Make sure the heater gets the water to temperature (around 78 degrees for most tropical species), and no higher. This may take some adjusting of the thermostat, remember it takes several hours for the tank to rise or cool much in temperature, so be patient when adjusting the heater. Most fish losses will occur in the first two months of a new tank. Stock lightly with inexpensive, hardy fish and feed lightly for the first 60 days, then begin adding more delicate species. See the paper "Aquarium Keeping 101" for more detail about a tank maturing to support livestock.

## **Save Money**

### **No-Cartridge Filters**

I hate to name brands here, but there is only one cartridge-less horizontal media power filter on the market that I am aware of –Hagen's Aqua-Clear. I personally run Aqua-Clear filters on the tanks at my shop and home. Besides being well-made and reliable, they don't have cartridges to replace every month. I have seen a lot of customers pass on the Aqua-Clear and buy a filter that was \$10 cheaper. But the cheaper filter always runs on cartridges which cost about five dollars each and last one month. In six month's time of buying cartridges, their \$10 initial savings cost them more than the Aqua-Clear, a year's supply of carbon (currently about \$25-30) and filter bags (panty hose). The filters made in Germany, Italy, and the US also run far longer and better than the Chinese economy models. If this isn't enough, consider the design flaw in filter cartridges. They run vertically –meaning most of the carbon settles to the bottom of the bag. Water will find the path of least resistance and most will avoid contact with the pile of carbon on the bottom. How vertical cartridge filters have remained on the market this long is a mystery to me. Also ignore that tank size rating on all power filters –about a ten time turnover per gallon is ideal -100 gallons per hour for a ten gallon tank, 500 GPH for a 50 gallon, and so on.

### **Fluorescent lights**

Many "economy" set ups come with a cheap incandescent hood with "screw in" bulbs. These bulbs produce more heat than light, burn out quickly, and aren't nearly as pleasant to the eye as fluorescent fixtures. The cost savings isn't dramatic, and after a couple of years of replacing bulbs will be higher. There are situations in coral reef tanks where standard fluorescent lights aren't nearly enough to support the livestock, so T5 bulbs or halides are usually recommended. Bulbs on reef tanks need to be changed annually, so look into that cost when deciding on a fixture.

### **A few words on heaters**

Never have an aquarium heater plugged in unless it is under water! They will usually crack or shatter. "Clip on" heaters are especially prone to do this. I won't use them. When adjusting your heater, keep in mind that it takes several hours for the tank to rise or cool much in temperature, so be patient when adjusting the heater. That's important enough to say twice.

### **Chlorine removers**

There are lots of products on store shelves that remove chlorine from aquarium water. All use the same ingredient –sodium thiosulfate. Some contain other ingredients that are listed as “non-active” for a reason. One popular brand even contains aloe and vitamin E to “reduce stress.” At the time of this writing, I have never seen a study that indicated that aloe or E provide a single benefit for fishes of any kind or reduced stress or promoted slime coat in any way. I personally use the drop per gallon type dechlorinators.

### **Don't buy unneeded chemicals!**

Such as algaecide,” pH Up”, “pH Down”, etc. Algaecide is simply toxic, and is never the solution. Even the milder ones that don't damage fish still leave dead, decaying algae behind and hurt the beneficial bacteria. pH up powder is sodium bicarbonate –baking soda. And I can scarcely think of a reason anyone would want to lower their pH with chemicals. This will only need to be exactly replicated every water change, and hard water will usually rebound to its original pH quickly anyway. Most cloudy water is a bacteria bloom from a new tank or too large a water change –not something that needs chemical aid. Removing ammonia is best done through water changes, zeolite, or simply time. Ammonia removing liquids or bottled bacteria aren't products I recommend for most situations.

I will likely think of more tips for this list and will add them as I do. I am also open to suggestions, so if you have any of your own, send them on to [Blueridgereef@gmail.com](mailto:Blueridgereef@gmail.com). Thanks and happy fish-keeping!

- Chip Bridges