

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES EVERYONE MAKES WHEN CARING FOR TROPICAL FISH

Tropical fish are difficult to care for, right? They're temperamental, delicate, finicky, and have very short life spans ... right?

Wrong!

Tropical fish are actually very easy to care for, if you know how. Yes, they do require a certain environment and some know-how when it comes to their tank, their food, their environment, and their health, but really, what pet can you keep without having a basic knowledge of the best way to care for him or her? Even a house cat or gerbil requires some basic understanding of their diet, toilet habits, and so on.

So what about tropical fish? Are they that difficult to care for and to keep? And if not, why do they have the reputation of being so finicky and delicate?

Chances are that many fish owners have made some very common mistakes when it comes to the care of their fish and because of this, their fish have died prematurely. Or they don't do the things they need on a regular basis in order to maintain their tank and the environment their fish need to thrive, and then have to do a lot of extra work to catch up once that neglect becomes obvious. However, that doesn't mean that it's the fault of the fish or their particular needs that causes this problem; with some regular care and maintenance they can actually do quite well in any home environment.

Think of it this way. If you want to lose weight and get into shape, people will tell you about how hard it is and that many people fail in their attempts and so on, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. Many other people are successful at it because they take the time to learn effective ways of doing this, and then actually do the work on a regular basis.

Those that are successful at weight loss and at keeping it off also learn about common mistakes that many people make that pack on the pounds, such as hitting the drive-through several times during the week, adding calorie rich foods to their everyday meals including cheese, sweets, oils, etc., plunking down in front of the television at night rather than going for a walk, and so on. By recognizing these common mistakes or typical bad habits someone that is very interested in weight loss and fitness can be sure that they avoid the same things so that they're more likely to have success.

Fish are somewhat like this. There is some work involved, there's no doubt about that. You do need to get familiar with the different breeds and how they interact with other fish, you need to understand a little bit about their dietary needs and how to keep their environment healthy and safe, and you need to know how to maintain your tank. But as overwhelming as all this might sound, it really isn't that difficult if you know how. And of course included with this is avoiding common mistakes that many fish owners make when caring for their new little pets. Let's take a closer look at those mistakes and you'll no doubt agree that exercising some precautions and avoiding these mistakes is actually going to save you a lot of work in the long run.

MISTAKE #1 - OVERFEEDING

Who would have thought that overfeeding your fish would be a problem? After all, we humans love to overeat don't we? It's actually a hobby for some, but a way of celebrating for others - what is Thanksgiving Day or the Memorial Day holiday to most except a chance to have the largest meal possible? Food is fun and enjoyable, so why is it a problem with the fish?

Overfeeding your fish is a problem for the same reason that regular overeating is a problem for many humans - too much of a good thing ruins the health overall. An occasional heavy meal for a human is not a big deal but constant overeating can lead to being seriously overweight or obese, which in turn leads to a host of other health problems as well.

Your fish don't necessarily get fat when they overeat, but their tiny and sensitive digestive systems can't handle this overload of food either. And unlike humans, fish don't know when to quit eating and don't have that "full" feeling that humans do. When their owners overfeed them they just keep eating without hesitation and never know when to quit.

One of the reasons that many owners have a tendency to overfeed their fish is because when they approach the tank with fish food in hand the fish have a tendency to swim to the surface, as if they are hungry.

In reality fish are typically just doing this out of instinct rather than actual hunger. The fact that they swim to the surface has really nothing to do with whether or not they actually physically need food.

Keep in mind too that in their natural habitat fish don't eat twice per day and usually not even every day, the way fish in your home might. Fish in the wild eat when they can, when they find food, and when they are not swimming away to avoid a predator or other danger. This isn't every single day and certainly not twice per day! It's not unusual for tropical fish in their natural habitat to go an entire day without eating, if not even two or more days.

So how often should you feed your fish? The rule of twice per day in very modest amounts usually applies to most breeds and tanks. It's important to be observant when you feed - a few leftover flakes is normal but if you have a lot of flakes that are still floating around a few minutes after you feed, you're probably overfeeding your fish.

For the tank's health as well.

Minding the health of your fish when it comes to feeding time is important but leftover fish food is bad for your tank's health as well. This leftover food breaks down and needs to be filtered out, and also encourages algae and bacteria growth. These are very bad for the tank's environment and can also contribute to your fish being in poor health.

Wanting to give your fish an adequate amount of food is commendable and of course you don't want to become unbalanced in the other direction and avoid feeding your fish on a regular basis, but just as with humans, neither extreme is good - starving yourself or overeating is damaging to your health, and doing the same to your fish is damaging as well. So be reasonable and balanced and you're sure to have healthy and happy fish.

MISTAKE #2 - NOT CLEANING REGULARLY

Cleaning your fish tank is probably not high on your list of fun activities, but consider a few reasons why it's important it is to do this regularly.

The health of the fish.

Obviously a dirty and neglected tank affects the health of the fish. Remember that the tank isn't just their home it's also their bathroom and while a good filter will take away some of the impurities that are naturally produced, it won't do everything. Algae collect on the glass, rocks, and decorations, and the filter itself needs to be cleaned out regularly as well.

Anyone that doesn't clean their tank regularly is neglecting their fish overall, and you may notice that the water doesn't look very good as well. Ask yourself if you were a fish if you would like swimming around in cloudy or green water! Many humans don't even like swimming in water like that on a temporary basis, much less would you like to live there!

Neglecting to clean your tank is like neglecting to clean your own home. Imagine eating off of dirty dishes or using a shower that's full of mold and mildew - yuck! But when you don't clean your tank regularly you're forcing your fish to live in those same conditions.

For your own convenience.

As with many things, neglecting regular cleaning of your tank means that when you do finally get around to cleaning it, the job is going to be that much more difficult for you. Algae build up on the glass and everything else in your tank - decorations, rocks, etc. - and if you neglect the job the algae will eventually become thick and slimy. Your walls may need to be scraped rather than wiped, and this too makes it that much worse.

MISTAKE #3 - CLEANING TOO OFTEN

If neglecting the cleaning of your tank is a big mistake, how can cleaning too often be a mistake as well?

Remember that in their natural habitat, fish don't swim in water that's purified and antiseptic. Oceans are full of bacteria, nitrates, and other materials that are necessary for the health of the fish. Thinking that your tank needs to be sanitary is as much of a mistake as thinking that your tank can be neglected.

When you do clean your tank you upset the natural balance of bacteria and other helpful elements, and doing this too often or too vigorously makes it that much more difficult for your tank to bring that balance back to where it should be. Using harsh cleansers or those not meant for aquarium water does the same thing.

When should you clean?

So if neglecting the tank is bad and cleaning too often is also bad, then how often should you clean?

Usually once per week is enough for just about any tank, and it's also typically recommended that you clean in stages. Vacuum the rocks and decorations during one session and then do a water change and clean the walls of the tank during another. Be sure you use only a damp rag to clean algae off the walls or a straight edge to scrape them if there is buildup; bleach and other cleansers have no place in an aquarium.

Large tanks may be able to go longer without cleaning as there is more room for the water and filter to do their jobs in keeping things clean, but these too need to be cleaned regularly and not neglected.

MISTAKE #4 - IGNORING THE SPECIES MIX

Fish are just fish, right? Toss them all into a tank and walk away, and they'll all play together nicely, right?

In reality fish are like any other animal in that certain species and varieties have their own personality traits and patterns of behavior, and some species just don't work well with others. Very aggressive fish that are cooped up with fish that are more shy and retiring may interfere with eating, breeding, and overall health. Some tropical fish are even referred to as bullies because of their very aggressive personality styles, and when you have too many bullies in one tank or pair large bullies with varieties that are more shy, the shy ones are going to be picked on and sometimes even physically hurt.

As an example, the auratus is an aggressive fish and intolerant of others in its territory. You should only have these in larger aquariums so they have plenty of space away from other fish. However, because of their size and distinct markings fish owners rarely consider how they interact with other fish and simply purchase them based on their looks and because they're somewhat smaller and common with other fish owners. As another example, the convict cichlid are called the barroom brawlers of aquariums because they are very aggressive and can hold their own against other fish.

Now imagine if you put auratus and convict cichlids in one tank - what a fight that would be! As amusing as this may sound, it's actually very dangerous to both

varieties of fish for them to be housed together this way. It's like putting two members of rival gangs in the same room; what do you think will happen?

It's not just putting overly aggressive fish together that you need to worry about but putting them in with fish that are more mild in temperament as well. For instance, the keyhole cichlid are very peaceful fish and make a great addition to any tank but are somewhat shy and don't defend themselves well against other fish. The banded leporinus is a type of fish that actually picks fights with other fish and is known to nip at them. If you paired these two types of fish in one tank it might not take long before you notice the leporinus nipping away at your poor defenseless keyhole cichlid.

When you own tropical fish you are taking on a responsibility when it comes to their health and safety overall just as much as you would any other pet. If you have one very vicious dog and one small toy poodle and keep them both in the same room, that poor toy poodle is going to be hurt very soon. This would be not just unfair to that little dog but it would be downright cruel as well.

It's very shortsighted to think that fish can or will learn to take care of themselves and that they'll just adjust, or that one fish should learn to defend itself as if they're all schoolyard children. Their nature is what it is and isn't going to change simply because you put it in a tank with more aggressive fish. It's up to you as a responsible pet owner to protect all your pets and this includes your fish.

Making it easy.

Some people may immediately get a bit overwhelmed by this and think that they'll need to do volumes and volumes of research on what species and varieties work well with others and which ones don't, but really it's as easy as learning about different varieties of dogs. Most people know that German Shepherds are more aggressive than most dogs and poodles are more delicate, and that most dogs fall somewhere in between these two extremes - and don't need a degree in animal psychology to understand that! Your fish are like that - there are some breeds or varieties that are very aggressive, some that are very shy, and most will fall somewhere in the middle.

As long as you have a basic understanding of the very aggressive varieties, you might want to simply avoid those when you first start out with your new tank. As you learn more about your fish and how they do interact with one another, and see those personality traits actually appearing, you may find it fun and enjoyable to learn even more about the different breeds and varieties and how they affect one another. Then planning your aquarium and your mix of fish will be an enjoyment and not a chore!

MISTAKE #5 - RELYING TOO MUCH ON CHEMICALS.

Do you have green water? There's a chemical treatment for that.

Do you have white or cloudy water? There's a chemical treatment for that.

Is your pH too high or too low? Are your nitrates out of balance? Do your fish have certain diseases or conditions? Guess what ... there's a chemical for that.

Walk into any pet supply store and browse the aquarium section and you'll probably see shelf after shelf of chemicals for anything and everything you may need for your tank.

Keep in mind that many of these chemicals, treatments, and conditioners are very good for your tank and are sometimes even necessary for the health of your fish. If you have one suffering from fin rot or dropsy or some other disease, giving them some antibiotics may be necessary to preserve their health and even their life. When you do a water change you need to add some conditioners so that your tap water closely mimics their typical water in the ocean.

But it's also a common mistake of many tank owners to use a chemical for anything and everything that is wrong or that they think is wrong with their water or their tank when in reality it might just be a bit of work that's needed on your part, some patience, some changes in how you care for your tank, or something else. Chemicals can actually be very harmful to your fish and can do more harm than good in some cases.

Think of it this way. After a heavy rain the ocean and other waters may be off balance when it comes to their level of bacteria and nitrates, since rainwater often washes these things away. But do you notice anyone going out and treating the ocean with chemicals to bring that balance back? Of course not. Nature has a way of adjusting and fixing itself naturally.

Yes, your tank is nothing like the ocean because it doesn't have those natural filters and living organisms that help this process, but there are many times when you simply need to correct your own habits in how you care for your tank and the water will fix itself.

As an example, if you have green water this usually means a buildup of algae. How often are you feeding your fish and are there fish flakes left over afterward?

These flakes break down and degrade and upset the balance of algae and bacteria. Have you neglected cleaning your tank for several weeks? Algae are probably collecting on the substrate, the decorations, the plants, and everything else and once these things get saturated then it starts to pollute the water. Regular tank cleaning and vacuuming of the substrate and other materials is imperative to keep your water clean.

So yes, you can buy some chemicals to dump in the water and kill algae but wouldn't it be better to be more mindful of your own habits and make some corrections and adjustments so that the water cleans itself?

This doesn't mean that you should never rely on chemicals or additives for your tank. If your fish are sick they need medicine. If you do a water change you need to add a small amount of conditioner. Some people have hard water from their tap, which means a lot of calcium carbonate, and this can be damaging to your fish and your tank overall. Adding a small amount of certain treatments and conditioners meant for hard water may also be necessary in these cases.

But you don't want to just rely on chemicals either. Give your fish a habitat and environment that is as natural as possible and they're more likely to not just survive but to thrive as well.

MISTAKE #6 - GETTING A SMALL TANK

You probably don't want to hear this, but size does matter.

All vulgarities aside, any responsible fish owner will tell you that you need to get the largest tank you can possibly afford and fit into your home.

Before you scoff at this advice as being just a scam by the aquarium manufacturers to get you to buy something huge and expensive, let's consider a few reasons why you want the largest tank you can possibly get.

More water is healthier water.

One of the reasons you want to consider the largest tank you can afford and fit into your home is that water has its own natural filters and other elements that help it to stay healthy for your fish. The more water you have, the more of these natural elements you'll have to keep it clean and healthy. Each fish is going to produce so much waste; if you have the same number of fish in a small tank this means that this amount of waste will be caught in that water, but a larger tank

means that this waste is spread out and therefore less damaging and easier to filter.

When your water is healthier and cleaner this way this also means less work for you. Larger tanks can go longer between cleanings than smaller tanks and need a smaller amount of water taken out for water changes, usually 10%-15% for the largest tanks versus 25%-35% for smaller tanks. So while you might look at a large tank and think that it means more work, it might actually be easier to take care of overall.

More water is healthier for your fish.

When your fish move around, they're getting oxygen just like humans get oxygen when they exercise or are physically active. More oxygen is healthier for all creatures, including fish.

When you have a small tank and your fish can't move around the way they should this is very unhealthy for them. If many fish are crowded into one small space this results in more of them becoming very territorial as they feel that they need to fight for space and food. They can get aggressive and injure other fish.

And fish are emotional creatures, whether you think of them this way or not. When they're crowded together they're not happy, any more than you're happy when you need to work in an overcrowded office or face rush hour traffic - too many people crammed into too small of a space means everyone is frustrated and unhappy. Your fish can be the same way.

How to adjust.

So if you can't realistically own a very large tank, what to do?

Well first of all don't let it put you off from the idea of owning fish anyway. One of the great things about fish as pets is that they can be kept virtually anywhere by anyone, including those who live in very small apartments. If you need to get a smaller aquarium, you simply need to make some adjustments:

- Make sure your decorations are to scale, and that you only have a modest number of them. No matter how cute that deep sea diver is or how much you love looking at that huge castle, be sure you purchase decorations that are appropriately sized for your particular tank.

- Plan your vegetation carefully. Add just a few plants and make sure their size is also appropriate for the tank. Don't let them overwhelm the space.
- Pare down the number and size of fish you plan on having. You may love the look of a particular variety or species or want a ton of fish to look at, but be fair. Tone down your purchases and buy fish that don't grow to be so large so that they're not crowded and so that they're all happy.

If you are sure to avoid these common mistakes when purchasing and planning on your tropical fish, you're sure to have a collection that is happy, healthy, and truly enjoyable for you and your entire family.