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Slippery Little

Your First Fish Primer by Paul Talbot (www.majesticaquariums.com.au)

When we started Urban Animal, we didn't realise that fish were, by numbers, the most populous members of the pet world, though dogs and cats seem to get all the attention. We did know that fish tanks are often seen as furniture or entertainment units which is not surprising considering that a 142cm plasma screen TV and an equivalent size, stocked saltwater tank cost about the same.

The problem with the latter comes from the first day when a chemical imbalance, power outage, infection or other woes can wipe out that investment with its continuing maintenance overnight whereas a TV can be rebooted and the worst case scenario is an accident.

But most people start out with a modest freshwater tank and work their way up the food chain of fish. So in the interest of helping those who have already started or are ready to dip their toe in the water, this is the first of a continuing series on those slippery little suckers (plus their invertebrate pals, plants and other aqualife) we'll be featuring in each issue. We tapped on the knowledge of Paul Talbot of Majestic Aquariums who has produced a series of DVDs for fish tank enthusiasts.

How can the best things sometimes have the worst reputation? So many people still think it is difficult to keep a fish tank.

As more and more people are living in home units, the choice of pets available is becoming limited. Fewer people are able to keep birds, dogs and cats, but the desire to keep a pet is stronger than ever.

Children are harder to entertain and more frustrating for a parent to raise in a small unit as opposed to a large spacious house. Home units allow less furniture so to keep the place looking as modern, comfortable and stylish as possible people have to select furniture with the biggest impact. On top of all this the work-week is getting longer and general stress levels are becoming higher.

The answer more and more people are turning to are aquariums. They are the best piece of furniture, they entertain the kids and the fish are a great pet and hobby. Many people, once they get an aquarium, can't image going back to life without one.

The main deterrent against people getting aquariums is the belief that they are hard to look after. Once upon a time they were hard to look after because there wasn't enough general knowledge on the subject.

The first thing that people do wrong is following the instructions on the fish food packets. Over feeding is one of the biggest killers of this great hobby—fish only need a surprisingly small amount of food. Many fish food containers will recommend feeding the fish twice a day what they can eat in 5 minutes. If you follow this rule you will certainly go through a lot of fish food but unfortunately you may also go through a lot of fish. The safest rule to follow is feed the fish a maximum of what they can eat in 30 seconds, 5 times per week, in the morning.

This should be seen as a guide and you should also be looking at the belly of your fish and if you notice the belly getting big you should reduce the amount of food or if it is starting to sink in then you can increase the amount of food. The fish should remain streamlined, not fat or thin.

The next big problem with fish keeping is that many people don't understand how a good filter works. A good filter will contain a mechanical and a biological filter component. The mechanical is normally wool and should be replaced or cleaned when dirty, it is used for physically collecting detritus out of the water. The most important is the biological, which should be a media that will allow bacteria to grow on it. These bacteria will grow over time and will break down the waste from the fish.

The enemy of an effective filter is tap water. The reason why tap water is the enemy is because of the chlorine in the water. Chlorine will kill the bacteria, which will mean the filter is useless until more bacteria have time to grow in it. The way to ensure that this will never be a problem is to only clean your filter media in water you have taken from the tank. You don't have to get the media very clean; you just have to free up any debris that may be in it to stop it from clogging. Never clean your filter in tap water. The fish produce waste and bacteria in the filter, breaks down the waste from the fish, so if the bacteria is harmed then the fish end up swimming in their own waste. So there is no wonder why they often get sick and die.



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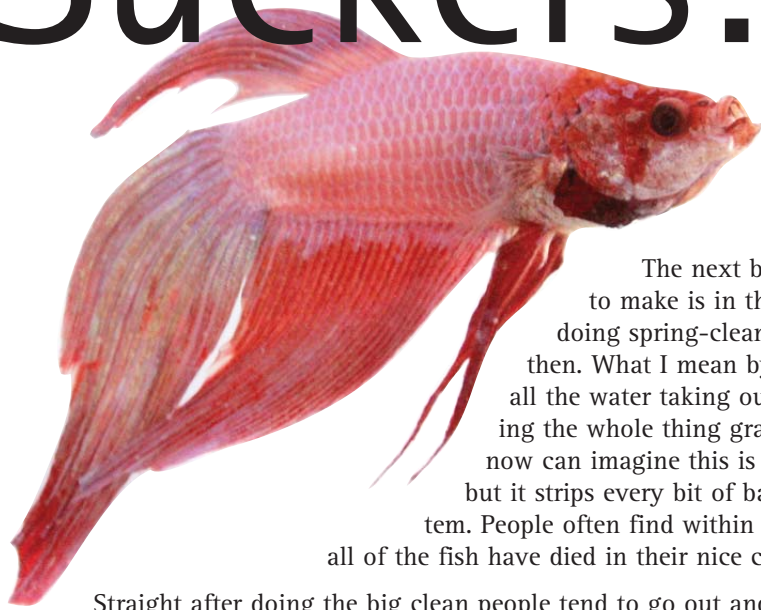
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Suckers!



The next big mistake people tend to make is in thinking they should be doing spring-cleans every now and then. What I mean by this is emptying out all the water taking out the fish and cleaning the whole thing gravel and all. As you now can imagine this is not only a lot of work but it strips every bit of bacteria out of the system. People often find within 1 or 2 weeks many or all of the fish have died in their nice clean tank.

Straight after doing the big clean people tend to go out and buy some more fish because they are excited at how good the tank now looks. Adding the new fish makes things worse and often makes people think it was the new fish that has made all of their other fish sick. Though it was really the fact that they stripped out their bacteria, so the fish were swimming around in their own waste and were going to get sick anyhow once their immune system has worn out.

The funny thing is that most people's reaction when they do this is to accuse their local aquarium store and tell them that their fish are no good and killed all their fish, even though they were totally healthy when they took the fish.

Believe it or not the most popular fish in the hobby is the worst fish for the hobby. Goldfish are related to the carp and many people know it is illegal to put carp back or into a river because they can destroy the whole river, as they are so destructive and messy. If this is known to be true then I don't know why so many choose this fish as their first fish.

In nature goldfish are a bronze colour but they have been line bred by man to possess all different shapes and colours. These are unnatural fish, many of which could never survive in the wild. The line breeding is a process of bringing recessive genes into dominance. One drawback is that along with the recessive shapes and colours you can also get recessive bodily functions such as weak swim bladders and low immune systems. Because of this, many of the stranger goldfish types are not as hardy as the earlier comet goldfish.

If you put carp in a river they wreck the river and if you keep gold fish in a tank be prepared that they will destroy the tank. They will eat and uproot plants and quickly foul up the water causing more algae and increasing the need for water changes and maintenance. The reason why I say they can be bad for the hobby is that many other tropical fish such as African Cichlids have more advanced digestive systems and are nowhere near as messy as the goldfish. Another major advantage with the tropical fish is there are various cat fish that can be very effective in cleaning up the tank and removing the algae off the glass, once again lowering your maintenance.

Fish keeping is something that should be very easy and bring you a lot of enjoyment. If it is not then seek better advice!

Good luck and enjoy.

DHARMA THE CAT by David & Dave



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