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## **Fishing for a New Hobby?**

If your last experience caring for water life involved a little round bowl and a goldfish named Gill, listen carefully dear reader. Setting up a home aquarium should not be taken lightly. Plan on spending lots of time up front reading and learning about your new hobby.

There's lots to know and many decisions to be made if you want to build a successful and thriving fish tank. For instance, do you want maintain a freshwater environment or saltwater? Or perhaps you want to really go for it and create a reef tank with all sorts of cool coral (check out the pics at Dr. MDB's Reef Page, <http://idt.net/~mbeth19/reef.html>). The freshwater tank will be the easiest to get started with and to maintain. The others require much more preparation and ongoing attention.

You will need to learn about filtration systems and water preparation. Then there are all of the supplies and accessories to consider such as heaters, lights, hoods for the tank, gravel, and plant life.

With that said, if you're willing to take the time at the outset to educate yourself, building an aquarium can be very rewarding. And with the Internet as your guide, you can do most of your planning online. Then, when you're ready, you can use the Net to purchase your supplies, accessories, and even the fish.

So, how to get started—first things first. Begin by bookmarking the Web Aquaria FAQ at <http://www.cco.caltech.edu/~aquaria/Faq/>. You'll be referring to it many times as you move through the planning process. After you've read the FAQ thoroughly, hang out for a while in newsgroups such as [rec.aquaria.misc](mailto:rec.aquaria.misc), [rec.aquaria.freshwater.misc](mailto:rec.aquaria.freshwater.misc), and [rec.aquaria.marine.misc](mailto:rec.aquaria.marine.misc). The folks who frequent these groups are an incredible source of information and are always quick to answer your questions.

Next it's time to put together a shopping list of supplies. You'll have to decide whether to purchase an all-in-one aquarium kit or to build your own package. The latter is recommended. You buy only what you need, when you need it, and you can mix and match your equipment. (If you've ever built a clone computer, you're already familiar with this philosophy). In any case, do your homework, and then shop for quality and price.

If you're going to mix and match, the first item to purchase is the tank itself. Here your choices are glass or acrylic and there are varying opinions as to which is better. The arguments for glass are that it's harder to scratch and it's cheaper. The folks at Fishtanks 'R Us (<http://www.fishtanks-r-us.com/>) tout acrylic as being better though, noting that it weighs less than glass, yet is stronger, and is a better insulator. It really comes down to personal preference.

All of the experts online seem to agree that the larger the tank, the better. Beginners tend to go for the smaller tanks and then wonder why their fish get stressed and die. The smaller tanks also leave no room for expansion—once you get started as an aquarist, you're likely to want to add more fish and plant life. So, think big!

Mike McEwan, an aquarium hobbyist and creator of the Aquaria Central Web site (<http://www.aquariacentral.com>) agrees that size is important. "The smallest tank that one should buy is 15 gallons. Larger tanks naturally keep healthier and allow the fish more space to grow and live," he explains.

Next on your shopping list should be a stand for your tank. The main consideration here is an obvious one—make sure it's sturdy and can hold the weight of your aquarium when filled with water. And don't forget to purchase a hood for the tank (that is unless you enjoy watching your fish jump out onto the living room carpet).

No aquarium would be complete without a filtration system. So, that's next on our list. The filter is the most important part of your tank. Unfortunately, learning about filtration is also the most complicated part of the project. There are several different types of filtration (biological, mechanical, and chemical), and many different filters (including corner, undergravel, canister, wet/dry) that will get the job done.

According to McEwan, "beginners need only concern themselves with mechanical and biological filtration. Mechanical filtration is the physical removal of dirt and debris from the water, while biological filtration what keeps the famous 'biological cycle' going strong, keeping the chemical values of the water in tact."

The Aquaria FAQ offers a detailed document on filtration. It's not exciting reading but it contains critical information. Read it at <http://www.cco.caltech.edu/~aquaria/Faq/filters.html> or print it out and save it for your files.

There are plenty of places to purchase filtration systems online. Larry Norris, a contributor to the [rec.aquaria](http://rec.aquaria.newsgroups) newsgroups, says he buys filters from Monolith Marine Monsters (<http://marine-monsters.com>), Premium Aquatics (<http://www.premiumaquatics.com>), and Aqualink (<http://www.aqualink.com>). "Monolith is good with hard to find stuff," he says, "and Premium is knowledgeable with great products." He shops Aqualink for a different reason, noting that they have "a poor selection but really good prices with their 125% price difference policy."

Now we come to the other tank accessories. You'll want to select a heater to keep your aquarium at a uniform temperature, and a thermometer so you can keep tabs on just how hot or cool the water is at any given time. If you want to be able to easily access your heater controls, get the kind that only gets partially submerged. And if you want to keep your thermometer accessible, go for the ones that stick to the outside of the tank, rather than those that float on the water.

You might want to load up your shopping cart with other accessories including pumps, lights, and test kits.

Now, for the fun part you've been waiting for—the fish! There are lots of options here, and your choice of specimens will depend upon things like the size of your tank, the condition of your tap water (your local aquarium store should be able to help you with this one), your preference for passive or aggressive fish, and how much you want to spend.

Also, note that it is recommended that you introduce fish gradually into your new tank, not all at once. This is very important, so read about it in the Nitrogen Cycle FAQ at <http://www.cco.caltech.edu/~aquaria/Faq/begin-cycling.html>.

McEwan advises beginning aquarists to "start out with a community aquarium...many small, peaceful and easy to keep fish. A few examples are tetras, small barbs, small catfish and danios." Dean Hougen, who contributed the *Good (and Bad) Beginner Fish* section to the Aquaria FAQ, offers similar advice, adding white cloud mountain minnows and rasboras to the list.

The Beginner's Fish page (<http://www.bright.net/~hix/salt/salt10.html>) recommends Damsels, Mollies, Clownfish, and Blennies, as good starter fish for a saltwater tank.

If you're going to purchase your fish online, get vendor recommendations first by posting to the rec.aquaria newsgroups. That's what Blake Wu, an Internet user, did when he wanted to buy an angelfish. "I bought an adult 5 1/2" emperor angelfish (\$59) from Flying Fish Express after posting on the Net asking for suggestions and advice. People were very helpful and offered their experiences."

While he was personally satisfied with Flying Fish, Wu did note that "some people had problems with getting the wrong specimens from them." He also complained that shipping costs were too high.

Wu brought up another excellent point. Don't forget to "check out the 'live guarantee' policies (if any) of the mail order companies."

So, your fish have arrived (alive, we hope!). And now it's time to feed them. Keith Seyffarth, who created and runs The First Tank Guide (<http://www2.avicom.net/weif/firsttank.html>), recommends that "you should purchase two or three different kinds of food to give the fish some variety and to help prevent digestive problems." He also points out that each type of fish has its own nutritional requirements, so you'll need to make some inquiries first.

There's lots more to learn...enough to fill hundreds of Web sites and at least a half dozen newsgroups. But this should get you started. And remember, it's a lot of work, but in the end, it's worth it. An attractive, home-built aquarium brings lots of pleasure to its owner. And just think, you'll have a pet that doesn't need to be walked, doesn't annoy the neighbors, and that thinks you're awesome just because you make goofy faces at it through the glass. Go fish.