

# Fear of Fish

By Mark Berry



Fish scare me. Not those swirling masses behind the glass at aquarium shops or even Sydney Aquarium. It's the idea of having a colony of finned friends as pets and being responsible for an entire ecosystem or water world. I'd have nightmares about the power shutting down (as it did for 14 hours last month when an underground cable shorted out our neighbourhood). I'd agonise over whether I was underfeeding, overfeeding, feeding the right food or whether I was able to master balancing water quality and pH.

I'm the kind of guy who has trouble with setting the time on the VCR, mastering the remote control's full functions and would be emotionally devastated at seeing one fishy floating belly up in the aquarium. And some of the prices of fish scare me even more than the cost of coral, invertebrates and decorative items. Fish are an investment, a science and a challenge.

Done right, they are more fascinating to watch than a flat screen TV (though on a size comparison, a 142 cm plasma screen costs about as much as the equivalent size salt water tank) but unlike the TV clicking off due to a power outage or defective cable, the salt water tank's life starts ticking away rapidly and has to be constantly maintained.

My fears were reinforced when I went into a large pet shop with an extensive fish area a few months ago following an issue of *Urban Animal* which had a basic article on fish tanks titled *Slippery Little Suckers*. One of the staff who knew me from the magazine thanked us for the article stating that she never knew you weren't supposed to wash the biological filter, noting, "I was wondering why my fish kept dying and your magazine answered that issue!"

This scared me even more, wondering if the people who work in pet stores and sell fish really know what they are doing. After all, they make their money from food, replacement filters, replacement fish, special products... so I thought I'd do some research.

The first choice is whether to have a saltwater or freshwater tank. That's easy for dummies like me. Maintenance is not so hard with freshwater, it costs less to start out and there's not as much science involved. Plus freshwater fish are generally cheaper. However there is a new generation of saltwater tanks that are pretty much 'plug and play' with automation, all-in-one systems and less guesswork in the long term maintenance.

The next question is what kind of tank to get. Most people start out with a 10 gallon (about 35 litre) tank or larger. That size is fine for a starter or if a child will be involved in the care, but larger tanks and more water means mistakes are likely to be less lethal. Also, it's wise to choose a tank that is shorter and longer than taller and thinner because you'll have more water surface area. And you must make sure that the location you choose can hold the weight, because a 20-30 gallon tank is heavy and unable to be moved. Stands are often more expensive than the tanks. A bookshelf won't cut it.

Plastic or glass? Most beginners favour glass, plastic can become scratched more easily and clouded over time, especially if exposed to UV light. Glass tanks are also easy to support from their edges while you have to be careful to have an even surface for plastic. In either case, having a layer of Styrofoam helps keep temperatures more stable as opposed to no insulation under the tank.

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Location is as important for fish tanks as it is for real estate. Remembering that the aquarium will be a centrepiece for viewing, placement from an aesthetic point of view as part of your indoor décor is the second point to consider after making sure the tank is not exposed to extremes of temperature such as a heater vent or air conditioner draft. And it's also beneficial not to have it exposed to sunlight as this encourages algae growth and temperature fluctuations.

The choice of fish is crucial but never buy fish the same day you bring home the aquarium because you need to do the set up and age the water as well as acclimate the fish to it once you get them home. Plan to buy them another day after you're fully set up, confident that everything is running smoothly.

You need to choose a filtration system of which there are three—mechanical, chemical and biological. Mechanical filtration involves the removal of particles of waste by passing water continuously through foam or other porous material. The filter traps particles of debris, and is periodically cleaned or replaced. Because solid waste is constantly being produced in your tank, a mechanical filter of some type is a must. Chemical filtration using carbon as one example, removes dissolved materials such as toxic metals and ammonia and is combined with other filters. And finally, the biological filter which has bacteria to convert the wastes fish produce to less harmful materials.

Confused? This is where expertise in assisting you in choosing not a filter but a filtration system comes from both research and an experienced fish enthusiast, usually known as the 'salesperson'. It's almost like buying a car stereo, except there are lives involved here. This will probably also lead to the question of whether a heater is needed. Because fish are cold blooded, a steady water temperature is critical and selection of the proper size and placement is vital.

A lot depends on the type of fish you are going to have, what temperature they do best in versus the average temperature of your room versus the temperature you are going to maintain. Again, your salesperson is going to help determine the right wattage as well as the controls and temperature scale among other options. And you must make sure your heater is working properly, running it at least a day before you add fish to be certain. A good quality thermometer is vital in checking temperature.

So when do we add the fish? Well, this is only half of the equation before populating your new environment. There's the issue of air pumps, gravel, plants (plastic or real), test kits, cleaning tools and of course the lights and hood as well as whether to have a background and decorations.

The scary part is really over at this point. Research and careful choice of equipment helps overcome potential problems as well as having a relationship with a knowledgeable and trusted aquarium expert because you'll be using them for a long time to come.

In our next issue we'll discuss choosing a reputable fish store and salesperson, choosing the last bits and finally picking the right fish for your community, transporting them and introducing them to their new world.



The first thing I learned about parrots after conquering cage size and shape requirements (see issue 7 Urban Animal) was that if your bird spends significant time in its cage, it needs toys to exercise its brain and spend time playing, shredding or picking apart.

Birds are highly intelligent and get bored without distractions. In the wild, they spend most of their day searching and working for food, foraging among the trees, leaves, bark and tearing things up. It's both for food and fun, so this translates to the cage environment as well.

As parrot keepers, we are charged with the duty of entertaining our feathered friends. Toys lift their spirits, satisfy some instinctual needs, and relieve cage boredom and stress. Birds love to pick, shred, undo and preen so there are a number of ways pet toys are constructed for their enjoyment.

You have a variety of materials to choose from: destructible, indestructible, foot toys, hanging toys, rattles, puzzles, games, pull toys, etc. You'll probably have as much fun assembling them as your bird will have pulling them apart.



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## Toy Story By Phil Tripp

Though there are countless toys at pet shops for sale, they can easily be combined with ones that you make quickly and cheaply at home. Birds love to watch you make toys and it familiarises them with the toy so they are not fearful when it is introduced to their cage. With any toy, you should leave it outside the cage in view for a day or two to build curiosity and so they can get used to it.

Don't crowd a cage with too many toys. Birds need room to move and can be cramped with too many hanging toys. Always rotate their toys so they get new challenges and don't get bored with the same thing. Keep an eye on toys and parts, trimming rope and fabric if they get too shredded, watching for loops that can trap toes and feet. And make sure if they get pooped on that they are cleaned and scrubbed with hot water.

You can use some common things from your kitchen or bathroom as you'll see, and craft items purchased from stores like Lincraft and Spotlight or other craft stores. One of my 'finds' was a set of untreated bamboo woven hats for dolls that were anywhere from 30 cents for a tiny one for the ringneck to a dollar for one that would have fit over a teacup which our Eclectus took great joy in shredding. The same day I found a tied clump of raffia which became the shredding base for several toy creations.

Craft sticks from small matchstick size to what look like tongue depressors can be sourced at stores, often in bulk. I've also gotten twisted paper sticks and wooden beads that easily assemble without gluing. Plastic beads come in all sizes and don't forget to check out the infant section in a large toy store or baby shop for kid safe components.