

THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

The Least Amount of Trouble

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After a long, dark, cold, snowy, frozen winter, and a cold, wet, rainy spring, I'm looking forward to warmer weather. And as things warm up during the sunny days ahead, I'm hoping to be outside a lot, on some old-fashioned angling trips, and collecting where I can amble for hours in search of nothing in particular, and seining fish that I'll probably let go.

Needless to say, I'll be spending time away from the fish room. That's why I usually stick with hardy little fish that don't need a lot of water changes, that won't starve if I can't manage to get them some live food, and that are happy with just a dash of flake food at the end of the day.

One of the least demanding fish I've ever kept is the tiny least killifish (*Heterandria formosa*). This diminutive fish thrives in weedy backwaters from the Cape Fear drainage in North Carolina, southward through Florida and southern Louisiana. The least killifish is actually not a killifish at all, but a member of the family Poeciliidae, or livebearers.

An attractive fish, the least killifish has the distinction of being the smallest vertebrate in North America. Males reach a maximum length of only about three quarters of an inch; females, about an inch and a half. Both males and females have a dark lateral band, broken up by a series of vertical bars. On the dorsal fin, near the back, both have a dark red spot trimmed with a bright red halo.

Unlike other poeciliids (e.g., guppies, mollies), female least killies don't have one single large batch of fry at a time. Although females store sperm from the males, the fry are released every few days or so, only one or two at a time. Fry are produced by superfoetation, which means that the female incubates them simultaneously along a continuum of developmental stages. At any one time, some will be comparatively mature, while others are only just beginning to develop.

In the aquarium, least killies don't demand very much care. They seem happiest in a well-planted tank, with lots of vegetation to hide in. Least killies are found in the alkaline—and sometimes brackish—waters of the southeastern coastal U.S., so you'll probably have the best luck keeping them in

slightly hard to hard water. Although they can withstand temperatures in the high 90s, they do best at about 70° F.

Least killies take all manner of live, frozen, and prepared foods as long as they're small enough to accommodate their tiny mouths. Because they're such a small fish, it's important to avoid overfeeding, especially at first, before they've had a chance to multiply and increase their numbers. Snails can help clean up uneaten food.

Least killies don't need much room, and are a good choice for aquarists who don't have much space. They can be kept and bred in small containers of only a gallon or two. A sizeable breeding colony can be maintained in a five-gallon tank.

Of course, least killies will appreciate a larger tank as well. They're extremely peaceful, and can be kept with other species provided that their tankmates aren't overly aggressive, or large enough to make a meal of them. I've kept them with other aquatic denizens of the southeast—sailfin mollies and bluefin killies. They can also be housed with other peaceful livebearers, like guppies and platies.

Because they're so small, you need to be careful not to siphon away the fry and smaller males during water changes. Likewise, I fit each of my power filters with a small sponge to keep them from being drawn up through the filter intake.

Like other livebearers, they will soon overpopulate their quarters if left unchecked. Because females store sperm for such a long time, one female can give birth to an entire colony over the course of a few months. Eventually, excess fry will need to be removed from the colony, and either offered to larger fish, or distributed at your local fish club meetings.

For the ultimate in low-maintenance fishkeeping, you can put least killies in a well-planted backyard tub and essentially forget about them. Each year, I put one or two in a well-planted backyard tub holding 30-50 gallons of water. They feed on the larvae of aquatic insects and multiply prodigiously. One year, I put one female outside in the late spring and brought in more than a hundred fish in the fall. This is perfect timing for me, as I'm ready to stop my summer wanders and once again start spending time in the fish room. ←