

THE MAKING OF A 125-GALLON NATIVE-FISH AQUARIUM DISPLAY  
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In the course of my aquarium design and maintenance business, I recently had the opportunity to create a display for a restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio. The theme of the restaurant was "Native Fishes of Ohio and the Great Lakes."

First of all, it was necessary to have an aquarium large enough to be the centerpiece of the restaurant. I selected a 125-gallon display tank; it fit perfectly! The aquarium was to be supported with super-sturdy, log-like barn beams. Along with the wood-finish aquarium frame, this gave the display the rustic, rugged woodland look of North America. The aquarium rests at eye level for almost everyone who views it. It can be seen throughout the entire restaurant. Its title is "Fishes of Ohio and the Great Lakes Region."

In order to achieve a true-to-life display, I knew that I first had to search for the proper decor at a nearby, manmade lake. Most aquarium dealers sell the same old "standard decor," but I wanted this display to be far different from the average, boring, pet-shop community display, with its misch-mosch of fish and plants from all over the world in a single tank. I wanted it to resemble a cross-section of a river, lake, or deep marsh.

Let me start by explaining the processing of the substrate. As I have mentioned, I traveled to a nearby lake and was able to locate the most interesting and natural-looking substrate for the tank. I shoveled about 75 lbs. into three five-gallon pails. The substrate was fairly clean, and had a dark brownish-gray appearance. I brought it home and completely washed it, again, again, and again. I used a sieve, which worked great! The gravel was so clean after washing!

At the same lake, I was able to locate very interesting, very clean pieces of driftwood. I cleaned and soaked them for two days in saturated salt water (32 gallons) and two cups of bleach. Next, after rinsing completely, I dried them for a day in the sun. The result? Super-clean, problem-free driftwood.

Next, I needed rocks. Again at the same lake, I had acquired some bluish-gray slate in the natural state (slate in natural form looks great in a native aquarium). I brought it home, carefully scrubbed it, and rinsed it over and over again. The result was clean rocks free of any foreign debris or unwanted algae.

Last, I needed some vegetation. This time, however, I was able to purchase "Plantastics" (brand) artificial plants

at a reputable dealer. I chose plants such as Cabomba, Hornwort, Anacharis, and Eel Grass, all of which grow locally in Ohio. The artificial plants are surprisingly lifelike with the proper arrangement, light, and some algae growth.

I set the display up in about two hours. I carefully tried to arrange the contents to look as natural as possible. For lighting, I used two 36" Vita Lites lightly misted with blue spray paint. Vita Lite creates a natural-looking light spectrum, and when coated with blue spray paint creates the impression of filtered lights (cloudy daylight). This looks great in this aquarium. The aquarium is kept sparkling-clear with two "Fluvial 403" canister filters tucked neatly out of sight.

My efforts created a display that is truly lifelike and makes an incredible statement about native fishes. The species in the aquarium are the following: Yellow Perch, White Perch, Black Crappie, small Freshwater Drum, Pumpkinseed Sunfish, Bluegill, small Longnose Gar, and Green Sunfish. Also, large crayfish inhabit this mini-ecosystem. Everything coexists in harmony, due to the size-ratio selection of fishes.

The display features a chart explaining the range of each species and the habitat of each fish in the aquarium. The display gets great reviews from the die-hard, unaware tropical-fish fans.