

The Miser's Guide To Fishkeeping

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By Robert Rice

A lot of us would like to Native keep fish. We enjoy watching and learning about them, but just don't want to spend a lot of money for a basic tank.

But it's possible to have an inexpensive, attractive tank that is easy to maintain. First, stop buying retail. If you're on a budget, keep your eyes open for used tanks and hoods at a garage sale or in the local paper.

For tank stands, I bridge two cinder blocks with a wooden plank and cover the whole thing with sheets, curtains, or whatever looks nice.

Place the tank anywhere you wish, provided you stay away from windows and heat vents. I have kept rows of tanks in my basement, garage and carport. The second thing to do is to decide whether this is a tank for shiners, darters or sunfish. If it is a darter/shiner tank, you will need a powerhead and a undergravel filter.

The place to buy your gravel is a chain hardware store. They have 50 pound bags of river pea gravel in a variety of colors for about 2 -3 dollars a bag, marketed for landscaping. Put some in a bucket, run a hose into it, and agitate it with your hand until the water runs clean, and you will have perfectly suitable aquarium gravel.

Hardware stores also sell a variety of plastic lighting grids that you can use as an undergravel filter. These cost about 1 to 2 dollars apiece. Take one of those, cut it to fit the tank and punch a hole in it for the powerhead intake tube. Old undergravel filters and powerheads may also available at second hand sales.

If you want to breed sunfish, you may have to opt for the more expensive power filter. Male sunnies will excavate nests in the gravel, uncovering the undergravel filter and making it useless.

I like a gravel bed that is about 6 inches thick. This bed provides homes for the good-guy bacteria that break down fish wastes and keeps the water pure.

Next, fill up your tank. If your tap water contains only chlorine, you can let it stand for 24 hours until the chlorine dissipates. If your water contains chloramines (a by product of chlorination), you may need to remove it by adding a few drops of a commercial solution commonly sold at pet shops. To find out if your tap water contains chloramine, call your local water company.

Now, it's time to collect some plants. "EEEEK," you say. "Collect plants?" Without suitable vegetation to provide oxygen and remove fish wastes,

you would be forced to purchase some high tech filtration equipment.

Find some rooted plants that tolerate lower light and grow well in cooler waters. In the native category, this includes watersprite, cabomba, anacharis (elodea), and vallisneria. In the non-native category, several types of swords and Java fern fit the bill. You will need 3 plants per gallon ultimately, but 1 per gallon should get you started. Completely cover their roots. Before adding the plants, however, soak them overnight in a solution of a half teaspoon of alum to a gallon of water, to kill off any hidden parasites or snail's eggs. Alum is available for a couple of dollars a bottle at drug stores.

If you chose the powerhead option, turn it on at this time. The lights should stay on at least 10 hours a day. Find the healthiest tank you can find and beg, borrow or steal a handful of gravel from it, to add to the tank. This will seed your tank with the good guy bacteria.

Next, it's time to add the fish. Not too many, though. Start with either 1 sunfish or 4 darter/shiners. That's it. At first, the water may look cloudy, but you're on the right track. The cloudiness is caused by a bacteria bloom, from the seeded bacteria. In a few days things will clear up.

Feed the fish twice a week and no more. In nature, fish get a large meal once a week or so and spend the rest of their time nibbling on plants and what not. Besides, who wants to pay for all that extra food anyway?

If all is going well after 2 weeks, you can add a few more fish. Again, add only one sunny or a few darters or shiners at a time. Continue this pattern every three weeks until you reach the 1 sunfish per 3 gallons or the 1 shiner/darter per gallon limit. Twice a month, use a gravel vacuum and remove 20 percent of the water while vacuuming.

At some point, algae will build up on the tank. Use one of those plastic brillo-pad type dish scrubbers to wipe it off periodically. Check the scrubber on a small patch of glass first, to make sure it won't scratch it.

That's it. Your tank maintenance is finished. With a little luck, your natives will thrive and perhaps even spawn. This low tech setup has served me well; I have kept and bred a great many species this way with little expense or problems. I hope it works as well for you.