

Profiting from a Trashy Tank

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It was the ugliest tank I had ever seen, It flouted every **goody-two-shoes** prescription for setting up an aquarium. Yet all the inhabitants seemed healthy and happy, and the owner was the most **successful** angelfish breeder I knew, producing thousands through tanks like this one.

What repelled me, and made money for him, was mud-the grossest, slimiest, blackest sort-in the bottom of the tank. Nor was it “**pure**” mud; leaves, reeds, debris, and probably beer cans and cigarette butts were included.

What this breeder had done was simply to bring home buckets full of bottom sludge from a local pond and dump it into some of his tanks. The fish loved it, he swore. At least they were not heard to complain. They found lots of little edibles and generally felt at home, he said. Besides, **fish** in nature are not likely to inhabit the sterile environments often striven for by aquarists. Often, nature’s swamps and creeks are cruddy. Why be overprotective?

I found the method astonishing, but the results were undeniable. Aesthetics-visual and olfactory-ruled out this technique for me, but it gave me an idea which brought me success with **tropicals** and domestics alike.

My Black-banded Sunfish were kept in soft, acid water. That matched their native water. Unfortunately, there aren’t many good aquarium plants where they come from. And, since I came from a hard, alkaline region, the plants found or purchased locally didn’t do well in the sunfish tank.

On my next trip to the Black-bandeds’ home, I filled a leaf bag with the oak leaves which drop in deep, clean piles in that region. The leaves were put into a gravelless tank. Addition of a cured piece of driftwood recreated the dark mood of Pine Barrens swamps. An aesthetic masterpiece, without plants. The fish took advantage of the cover, and seemed healthy.

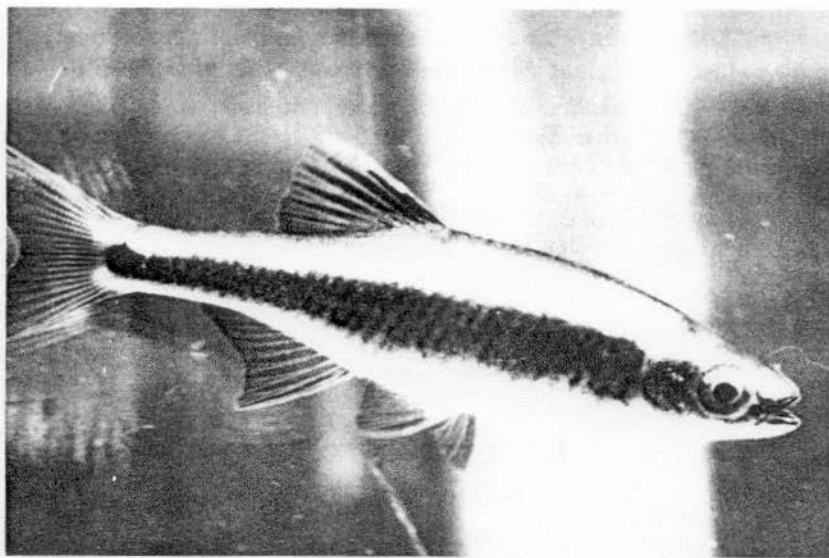
Why? The reasons I would propose reflect some guesswork, but I would suggest these:

- the darkness and natural texture, recalling home; in other words, provided security;
- the acidifying effect of the leaves, said to discourage growth of bacteria;
- the slow decomposition of the leaves, intensifying the darkness of the tank by dyeing the water that characteristic, amber, cedar-water color;
- the convenience of leaf layers for hiding.

Whatever the biological reasons, the aquaristic were appealing to me (to heck with the fish). The tank was easy to clean and empty; attractive; and almost disease-free. I quickly transferred the method to tanks of tropicals. Species with which I'd never had much success, including Checkerboard Cichlids, Rams, and Agassizi, spawned readily. The leaf surfaces proved convenient spawning sites.

I have used the technique frequently. Oak leaves have worked out best for me, since, in autumn leaf piles, they are relatively clean to start with and easy to rinse; long-lasting; and acidifying. Other kinds of leaves could probably be found that would work just as well. I have even tried pine needles with no observable ill effects, though the test was not really an extended one. There is no reason not to use the method in water hard and alkaline enough to stay that way, either; autumn leaves fall into all kinds of water.

The rather unconventional leaf method led to tanks which were conveniently maintained, quickly dismantled and re-established, attractive, and successful. Odd as it may sound, at least it's not as odd as mud. †



Notropis euryzonus, Broad strip shiner. Photo by Dick Stober