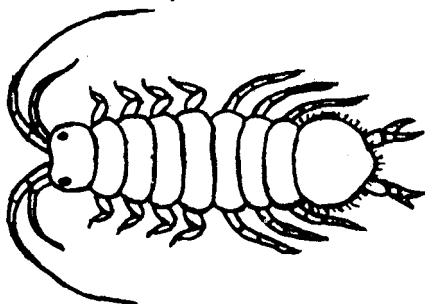


Water Louse (*Asellus aquaticus*)



By Joseph Boucher

Water Louse *Asellus aquaticus* makes a good live food for medium to large bottom feeding fishes. And they are bottom dwelling scavengers that feeds exclusively on dead plant and animal matter, and they make an efficient clean-up squad in community culture tanks by consuming leftover food before it decays and pollutes the water. They never molest any forms of live animals that can be seen with the naked eyes, and they seem to do well on a vegetable diet alone when forced upon them.

They are supposed to be scarce in North America and very abundant in Europe where they are common in permanent fresh water ponds. They are a true aquatic specie and are much better for aquarium culture than our common Pill or Sow bug of stagnant ponds. I once had a culture of them that was started with a few specimen found in a backyard lily pool, and they were well worth raising and withstood short distance shipping well. The similar $\frac{3}{4}$ " *Asellus militaris* are common in eastern N. America and also make a good live food for large aquarium fishes.

Asellus aquaticus are especially recognized by their characteristic 7 pairs of legs arrangement, the 4 pairs of front legs points forward, and the 3 pairs of slightly longer hind legs points backward. Their body is segmented, and the 4 front segments curves forward, and the 3 hind segments curves backward. The males grow to about $\frac{1}{2}$ " in length, and the females are smaller and grow to about $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Their body is silvery shiny in color, and they only crawl on the bottom especially among rooted vegetation, and usually hide among the bottom debris.

They reproduce sexually, and the female carries the eggs in her brood pouch located between her front legs, until the eggs hatch and the youngs develop in a few days. When the youngs are released, they look like their parents and are able to manage for themselves. The females produce a new brood of youngsters

about every month from early spring to late summer. The young develop into reproducing adults in about one month depending on the temperature. The life span of the *Asellus aquaticus* is about one year. The *Asellus* population in ponds are active all through the year even under ice, but they seem to require a temperature c about 60 degrees F. to start breeding.

They can be cultured indoors in 5 gallon or larger aquariums filled with aged tap water, and provide about 1" of mortar sand, and rooted or floating aquarium plants which will absorb the detrimental carbon dioxide as plant food. Floating Anacharis or Myriophyllum plants are used in cultures, because they don't interfere with collecting the *Asellus*. And maintain a room temperature of about 70 degrees F., which seems to induce year around reproduction. They can tolerate a mild acidic condition, but they seem to prefer a neutral pH value of 7.0, which can be maintained with Sodium Bicarbonate when the pH value goes too acidic. And partially change the water every 2 weeks. They seem to like to forage in the loose bottom sediment which can be substituted with pulverized peatmoss.

Feed them daily with just enough food that they will consume in a couple of hours, using a variety of dietary products dropped on the substrate such as, Desiccated Liver tablets, Alfalfa or Spinach tablets, and supplement their diet with Scrambled Eggs. They seem to like feeding on golden brown Diatom Algae, such as the kind that clings to submerged small stones and plant debris, which can easily be supplied to vary their diet.

The *Asellus* can be collected from the culture by netting or siphoning them out with the sediment which is placed in a shallow dish with clear water, and the sediment removed with an eye dropper, or the sediment rinsed out through a coarse flat net or sieve.

Starting cultures of *Asellus aquaticus* are not available from commercial culturists in this country, and they may have to be imported from England or Germany where they are available from amateur culturists over there. But they have been found in North America in nursery ponds where water lilies and other aquatic plants are propagated, where they probably were introduced with imported aquatic plants.