

NEMO, ALIVE OR DEAD

Keeping exotic fish alive and out of waterways **BY DEANNA UUTELA**

For many children, the loss of a pet fish is their first real experience dealing with death. Unlike a cat or dog who mysteriously just “runs away,” a fish is found by a child belly up and stiff as a board. A funeral for the aquatic friend may either include a burial in the backyard or a trip down the toilet. Through this life experience, the child learns not only that everything one day dies — as if that isn’t depressing enough — but that they will go through many pet fish throughout their lifetime.

After the 10th goldfish, your desire to upgrade might lead you to explore more exotic species of fish such as koi, angelfish, cichlids or catfishes. People are drawn to tropical fish, fish that are native to tropical waters, because of their exotic look and bright colors, but with an upgrade in fish comes more responsibility, an increase in upkeep that some people aren’t prepared for — and environmental concerns.



Starry Puffer

“You have to keep a closer eye on the water temperature when dealing with tropical fish,” says Pet Time employee Brandon Hemphill. He recommends frequent water changes, either weekly or biweekly, and maintaining a temperature of around 80 degrees.

The main thing to remember, he says, is that an aquarium doesn’t maintain itself. “An aquarium is like a car: If you buy cheap parts your aquarium isn’t going to run well, and you will have to replace them often,” Hemphill says. “I recommend not skimping when it comes to parts.”

Eric Hanneman, owner of Liquid Sunshine, says that the key to a healthy tropical tank is the filters. “You need a filter to remove the ammonia that fish secrete, bacteria that forms in the tank and other pollutants like nitrates,” explains Hanneman.

Another important factor to keep in mind when creating your tropical tank is the types of species you put in your tank. “Most tropical fish are omnivores,” says Hanneman, “and you have to make sure to put all aggressive larger fish, like cichlids and catfishes, together and smaller fish, like guppies and angelfish, together in a separate tank.”



Harlequin Tusk

Hanneman has had many people try to return an aggressive fish after it killed all of the other fish in their tank or try to sell him a fish, like an Oscar, that grew so large that it no longer fits in their tank. The majority of fish owners understand that if you no longer want or are able to take care of your fish, you should take it to a local pet store specializing in tropical fish, but there is still that small percentage of folks who have watched *Free Willy* one too many times and believe releasing the fish into a lake or river is the more humane thing to do. These people might have good intentions, but they are *very* wrong.

“Releasing fish into rivers or lakes is deadly to the ecosystem,” says Hanneman. “The pet fish could introduce new diseases to native plants and animals, or they might become predators to small native fish and compete for food with the native species.”

Hanneman says that researchers have found goldfish in the Willamette River and other exotic fish species in the Tualatin River. According to the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences at Virginia Tech, many species of exotic fish have been released into waters throughout the U.S. The snakehead fish, an aggressive predator with sharp teeth native to Asia, has been found in ponds in Maryland, Florida, North Carolina and Hawaii. The European ruffe fish has been seen in Wisconsin and has displaced many native fish species there. And the list goes on.

“The best thing to do before purchasing an exotic fish is to do your research,” says Hemphill. “Find out what size the fish gets, if it is aggressive or not, if it requires special care. Don’t just go to a store and impulse shop, and if you ever want to get rid of a fish never ever euthanize it or release it into a water stream. Always bring it to a pet store.”

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