

## Seeing Spots

**An explosion of pest starfish lead to the aquarium's newest addition.**

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Our new harlequin shrimp is beautiful and interesting to watch.

The new harlequin shrimp's first starfish meal.

One of the offending Asterina stars. I noticed the beginnings of our starfish problem about a year ago. One day, I glanced in the tank and saw a tiny grayish-white, asymmetrical starfish clinging to the glass. In my ignorance, I was excited to see this cool little hitchhiker in the tank. My initial thrill quickly turned to wariness as I started an online search to ID the critter.

Hmmm. Asterina starfish. According to my research, these little stars were not likely to cause trouble other than the fact that they can reproduce rather quickly. That didn't sound too bad to me, so after identifying the stars, I simply ignored them. I had other things on my mind (namely, the daunting task of moving the tank and all its inhabitants from the third story of an apartment building to a new house across town). Plus, the stars weren't a problem — or so I thought.

After the big tank move (it took my fiancé and I 13 hours, but the only thing we lost was a peppermint shrimp), I began to notice more and more of these Asterina stars. In fact, as I peered into the tank, I suddenly realized we had quite the crop of these creatures. I gave up counting after a while, but I guessed that we probably had more than 1,000. Yikes!

The stars weren't really hurting anything (that I noticed), but their sheer numbers made them unsightly. They had to go.

Back to the trusty Internet. I was advised to remove the stars by hand. They congregated on the front glass in the morning before the lights came on, so I carefully scrapped them off with a fish net. I did a pretty good job, but after a few weeks of this routine it became apparent that I was nowhere close to making a dent in the star population.

I explained the situation on my favorite reef forum. Someone mentioned they once had a similar problem and took care of it by adding a Harlequin shrimp, which eat starfish. "Great," I thought, "problem solved!" Not quite.

I hesitated once I learned that these elegant-looking spotted shrimp only eat starfish (they eat them alive!). If I added a Harlequin, I would have to feed it a steady diet of starfish once the Asterina starfish population was eliminated. I absolutely hate it when creatures die in my tank, and I knew I would feel sorry for each poor starfish I fed to the shrimp. Then again, this is what is happening in the ocean every day. I decided to take the plunge (no pun intended).

Harley is a unique and beautiful addition to our tank. He hides under rock ledges much of the time, but comes out at night, sometimes swaying around in a strange dancing motion. He devoured our Asterina stars in about a month's time. Last week I decided it was time to feed him again, so I bought a starfish and added it to the tank.

Harley left the star alone for a few days, but one evening as my fiancé and I were about to leave for dinner, we glanced in the tank and saw that the starfish had become dinner for Harley.

I'm not going to lie. It was kind of hard to watch. But it was also fascinating to see this tiny shrimp (he's about 1½ inches long) incapacitating the larger starfish. Talk about the circle of life! It's just another reason I love this hobby. It's like having your own window to the sea, right in your living room.

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