

Discus Fish Care Tips

Discus fish care tips from a legendary fish breeder.

By Tony Silva

"You have not aged after all these years," Gan Kian Tong said as he greeted me. I responded in kind. It was the Chinese New Year and goodwill is generously bestowed on friends at this time of year. Both of us had changed. It had been about 20 years since I had visited Gan – he was the person who explained to me that in Chinese culture the surname comes first, then the given name. He told me this after I questioned him as to why both he and his brother had the same first name (Gan Kian Tong and Gan Kian Leng).

The Gan name may not be well known today, but in 1989 it made history. Their discus fish won both first and third place at the Aquarama Fish Show in Singapore. By May 1990, Dr. Clifford Chan had written about the Gan discus fish in *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* and then in 1991 the discus fish were illustrated in a book called *Singapore Discus*. At that time, many publications illustrated their brightly colored discus fish. They had produced several high body strains of turquoise discus fish, including one in which the blue stripes appeared in a vertical pattern. Their red-spotted discus fish was also impressive. The size and color of the Gan discus fish made them stand out. [Asian Discus Fish>>](#)

The discus fish that made history no longer rule the fish farm. The Gans are commercial tropical fish farmers and raise what is most salable. They have reared rainbowfish, angelfish and other species commercially at different times. Discus fish are not as popular as they once were. The fish farm now specializes in arowanas or dragon fish, as they are called in Asia (which can be worth more than \$10,000 each as adults), and Endler's livebearers, which are reared as fish food for the arowanas. While raising the Endler's livebearers, they found some unique colored males, selectively bred these and they now have a strain that they call the red flame Endler's livebearer, which they will begin marketing soon. As aquarists par excellence, the Gans are very successful raising whatever fish species they target. [Discus Fish History>>](#)

The Gans started raising tropical fish in 1961, when the elder Gan kept and bred guppies and angelfish. Initially, the fish were bred in a two-room flat but eventually the family went from hobbyists to fish farmers. Eventually discus fish were discovered. This was at a time when the fishkeeping hobby was still in its infancy. As an example, fish aquariums at the time were heated with kerosene lamps placed under the slate bottom, which warmed the aquarium water. Success was obtained but then in 1972 and again in 1973 disaster struck Asia, with the spread of disease that proved devastating to discus fish. The family lost much of their fish breeding stock, but their love for the discus would not fade. In the 1980s they entered discus breeding again and quickly achieved the aforementioned acclaim. The best discus fish that could be acquired were obtained, selectively bred and prize winning stock soon emerged, giving them their coveted Aquarama Fish Show victory.

As Gan Kian Tong showed me the fish hatchery, we discussed discus fish. The information he shared is never outdated and forms the basis for this article.

Water Quality. Massive water changes are important. When discus fish were kept at the fish farm, they received 80 to 90 percent water changes daily. The water originated from ponds at the fish farm.

Diet. The diet should be varied and balanced. Gan fed his discus fish tubifex worms but these were cleaned, treated with antibiotics and came from a known source. At the time, tubifex worms were widely fed to discus fish. In addition, the discus fish were fed bloodworms and a beefheart mix. Today he would probably feed one of the commercially available foods. [Food and Color>>](#)

Prevent Overcrowding. Frequent water changes allow for a higher fish density, but the Gans never kept more than a dozen discus fish in a 50-gallon aquarium.

Breeding. Only discus fish that were mature were used for breeding. The average breeding age for discus fish at the time ranged from 15 to 18 months. Modern discus fish can be bred at an earlier age, but back then the likelihood of pairs eating their eggs or fry was lessened if they were bred when very mature. Inbreeding proves deleterious, reducing body size and stamina and thus should be prevented. When the Gans were breeding discus fish, they regularly introduced new blood. Pairs were allowed to form through natural selection and the fry were introduced to *Artemia nauplii* after two to three days.

Observe your Fish. Spending time with the discus fish will teach you much about them. The Gans are always around their fish. Each time I have visited them, it has been a weekend day and each time the family was actively involved in caring for their fish. This undoubtedly has led to the level of success.

As I left the fish farm, I commented that perhaps discus fish would one day return to popularity. Gan Kian Tong responded "Maybe one day." I certainly hope that day will come soon and when it does I am convinced that the Gan name will again be the talk of the discus fancy.