

Keeping North American Native Fish Species

Obtaining native fish species of North America may be harder than keeping them.

By Jeremy Gosnell

Q. I live in North America and really would like to keep some native fish species. Bluegill, bass, walleye and other species really interest me. I was wondering what it would take to house these animals. Are they tough keepers?

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A. Most native fish species such as bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*) are not particularly tough to keep in the aquarium. Obtaining these animals legally often proves more difficult than actually keeping them. Because the vast majority of aquarists prefer to keep colorful tropical aquarium fish, many fish outlets and even online vendors have opted not to carry cold water or North American fish species. Anyone who has seen an attractive bluegill or even a yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*) in the wild knows that these animals are, in their own way, just as attractive as their tropical counterparts.

I would think that your best option for obtaining fishes for a native aquarium would be from a local fishery. I know here in Maryland there are many fisheries that raise animals for lake re-stocking and would also be willing to sell some of their charges to a responsible aquarist.

After you have obtained your fishes, there are two major concerns when looking at keeping these types of animals. One is size, because many North American fish grow large quickly. The other consideration is temperature. Depending on where you obtained your fishes, (from the wild or a fishery), they may need an aquarium that stays cool. The best way to keep any aquarium environment cool is with a chiller. Many North American fish species prefer temperatures between 50 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit. In many cases temperatures that exceed 75 or 80 degrees Fahrenheit can harm or even kill these animals. I can't think of any instance where bluegill, bass, walleye or perch were kept in environments that reached high tropical temperatures for continuous periods of time.

The next issue that you will find with North American fishes is their consumption of fish food and production of waste. Because these fish are fast growing and many are powerful predators, they eat a lot. I would suspect that you will need to start these animals off using only live fish foods such as grass shrimp and feeder fish. You will need to condition them to accept prepared or frozen fish foods. Your goal in the end would be to have an aquarium full of fish that accept easy-to-feed prepared fish foods. You will likely find that these fishes grow very quickly, and in the case of large- or smallmouth bass consume anything they can get into their mouths.

That leads to the next thing to remember when looking at these animal's requirements. You will need a very large aquarium! I would recommend a 180- to 200-gallon aquarium when hoping to house large North American fish. I would also recommend a sand bottom and lots of rockwork for hiding. Natural or artificial aquatic plants could be employed and while it may not be native, anacharis makes a hardy addition to any captive freshwater environment.

North American native fish species are not really tough keepers but just fish that have a slightly different set of requirements than the tropicals we know and love. Cool water, a large aquarium, plenty of fish food and frequent partial water changes are all part of the equation that leads to successfully housing these unique native fishes.