

Ordering Aquarium Fish Online

Is it safe to order aquarium fish online?

By Jeremy Gosnell

Q. I have always wanted to order fish online because the selection is almost limitless! Is it safe to purchase fish online and what precautions do these retailers take to make sure the fish arrive healthy?

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A. An enormous selection of rare marine and freshwater fish are available from various online retailers. Ordering fish and other aquatic life online is fairly common today and some of my favorite retailers are online retailers. There are some things that you can do as an educated consumer to help guarantee that the retailer you chose is reputable and also that there is a likely chance that the fish you get will be healthy.

We have to remember that fish are living animals that experience a variety of stress and emotion. Many people look at an online fish retailer's website and are awestruck by the selection and order a variety of animals unsuitable for their aquarium.

The first step you should take is researching what fish species you are looking for. If you see something online that strikes you as exciting and unusual, research and read about the fish's behavior and requirements. Many online retailers make this rather easy because they list the fish's adult size, coloration, feeding requirements and more, right on the website. Some also provide stocking charts with detailed information about what can be kept with certain species.

Once you have a species selected you can begin looking for the most suitable outlet to purchase from. Some outlets are large facilities that have a reputation for excellence and others are smaller, family-run businesses. I think the most important factor in ordering livestock online is selecting a retailer that is close to my location. When I tried ordering fish that were shipped from the other side of the country, I often found that problems with shipping routes or logistics delayed the packages delivery and caused a DOA (Dead on Arrival). Because marine fish are not a renewable resource, this presents very complex ethical and conservation concerns.

I have found several online retailers within 4 to 7 hours of my location and have had good success ordering from them. Also, finding a nearby online vendor can save a tremendous amount in shipping costs. Some local vendors are willing to ship aquatic livestock with ground shipping because they are so close the package will arrive the next day.

That said, tragedies do occur when ordering livestock online. Over the years I have had fishes and corals arrive with busted bags, water that is freezing cold, overly stressed and in worst case scenarios dead. When ordering fish online I always watch the forecast and have the fish shipped on days that are not likely to be ice cold or blazing hot. Typically if you are prudent about looking at weather conditions when your fish will be in transit you can really increase your level of success. At the end of the day, ordering fish online should be a supplement to making purchases at a local fish store. The best way to get aquatic life is to get it directly from a fish outlet. That way you can inspect your purchase and make a good decision on whether or not the animal is healthy and likely to survive in your aquarium.

Most retailers take precautions by first bagging the fish in multiple bags. They also use pure oxygen to fill the empty bag space with O₂. This helps guarantee that even large fishes will not break through their bags and lose all of their water in transit. The better retailers actually package the bagged aquatic life in a dense wrap of newspaper and Styrofoam peanuts. This helps ensure that even if fishes are tossed around a bit, their bags will remain somewhat stable. There is typically a heat pack, not unlike the popular hand warmer heat packs installed to transmit heat into the box and keep the water warm. Finally, the aquatic life is placed in a Styrofoam cooler to ensure as little temperature fluctuation as possible.