

Aquatic Plantkeeping

The “New” Planted Tank - A new columnist offers fresh insight into aquatic plantkeeping.

By Robert Hudson

The first time I felt a true sense of awe while looking at a freshwater planted aquarium was when I stumbled into a neighborhood pet store more than 15 years ago. I found a 300-gallon display tank planted with incredible detail. A large log ran three quarters of the length of the tank with plush cushions of moss and layers of ferns. A blanket of grass stretched out across the bottom and between dense groups of tall stalks of drooping leaves that swayed in the current like weeping willow trees on a warm, breezy day.

Glowing like fireflies, a group of more than 50 neon tetras darted back and forth in unison. Looking at the aquarium was hypnotic. As it drew me closer with each glance, I found something different: more fish of all sizes and colors, and different textures and patterns of leaves, roots, wood and stems. I had never seen anything like it before and had no idea such a living, fluid re-creation of nature was possible in an aquarium.

I was truly inspired and hooked. I began by having my own aquariums and getting involved with other people with similar interests on the Internet. Eventually, I went into business bringing exotic plants to the hobbyist and educating wherever possible.

My goal in writing this column each month is to share that sense of awe and inspiration, and if I am lucky, to inspire other people to seek out the quiet contentment and refuge I and others have found in this hobby.

Different Strokes

There are many ways of appreciating aquarium gardening. Some people take it as a very serious art form, using the aquarium as their canvas and the plants, rocks and wood as the paint. These artists pay close attention to fine detail to create a specific scene or to evoke certain emotions. This has become evident in recent years from various plant photo aquascaping contests found on the Internet.

Another area of interest is using plants to create natural biotopes. A biotope is a re-creation of an authentic ecosystem from a specific region. Although creating a work of art or a biotope is fascinating, others simply appreciate the plants and become collectors or absorb themselves in the science of growing plants.

Two Plants For Your Tank

A collector may attempt to possess as many plants as possible, concentrate on a specific genus or plants from a specific region of the world, or gather the odd, unusual or flamboyant colors. I would like to talk about two plants I think are worthy collectibles. One has been known to hobbyists for several years, and the other may be unfamiliar and deserves a closer look.

Rotala macrandra is a stunning plant that some call “king of the reds.” It is characterized by dark-red clusters of leaves that remind me of rose petals. This beauty is part of the Lythraceae family and is found in the fast-moving marsh waters of southern India. It has often been considered a difficult plant to grow in the aquarium, but as long as specific conditions are maintained, it can do very well. Soft to medium-hard, acidic water; 25 to 35 ppm of carbon dioxide; intense lighting; balanced nutrient supply and good water movement are key factors. It also has been reported that the substrate should be free of lime.

“Trust me, the mental and visual reward of finally seeing this plant growing beautifully more than makes up for all those frustrated moments you had when you first started having this plant in your tank. I must of tried and failed at least five times before I finally got the hang of just what makes this plant come alive, both figuratively and literally. It was well worth it. Don’t give up!”

— Paul Higashikawa

“I have had trouble in the past growing this plant. It is one of my favorites. Now that I have better lighting, I am doing just fine growing it.”

— James Lefevers

Because of the high lighting requirements, *R. macrandra* will not hold up for extended periods of time in retail display

aquariums, which usually have low, subdued lighting. Store owners who are ignorant of the general requirements of aquatic plants or unwilling to invest in equipment needed to keep plants healthy are often reluctant to buy plants that begin to degrade after a week if they're not sold. This is the conundrum that has made *R. macrandra* and other such plants difficult to find in retail stores, even though the plant is readily available. The hobbyist can either turn to an Internet supplier or request a local store to special order the plant, which most stores are able to do.

Cyperus helferi is a graceful-looking, grasslike plant found in the rivers and marshes of India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and western Malaysia. The dense, long and thin leaves grow from a rhizome, which may be divided for propagation. Lighting appears to be the greatest factor in helping this plant thrive. Suited for both soft and hard water, the plant needs other factors, such as a nitrogen-rich substrate, moderate to bright lighting and moderate CO₂ levels to yield the best results.

Its appearance is somewhat like a plant called *Acorus*, which is not a true submersed aquatic plant and does not live long underwater. Unlike *Acorus*, *Cyperus* thrives underwater.

For the best visual impact, the plant should be placed in an open area where it can be seen from top to bottom. Arranged among rocks and wood with low carpeting plants in front of it, a serene and natural-looking scene is created.

Cyperus helferi is only available in the United States from importers who bring the plant in from Asian plant farms. The hobbyist may find the plant from Internet sellers or retail stores that deal with importers. In Europe, the plant is more readily available through the Tropica company of Denmark and Dennerle of Germany. Businesses like mine, Aqua Botanic, bring this plant to American hobbyists to enjoy. It is a plant worthy of collecting and experiencing.

Calling Aquatic Plant Fans

One of the attractions of Internet forums is the ability to interact with others and share comments and pictures. I'd like to try and incorporate that aspect into this column. I invite readers to e-mail me about their favorite plant or collection of plants. Show me what you have, and I'll share some of the pictures and comments in future columns. E-mail pictures (300 dpi jpegs or tiffs) and comments to Robert@aquabotanic.com. Include a full name and mailing address.