

Seven Families of Aquarium Fish

Learn about the seven families of aquarium fish.

By Mike Nolan

Will that fish do well in my aquarium? Can I keep that fish with my guppies? Will that fish outgrow my 20-gallon aquarium? If you have ever asked these or similar questions, has the response been tentative or later proved wrong? With the hundreds of species of fishes available in even a moderate size pet store these days, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the average aquarist to know or remember what each and every fish will require for maintenance and good health. How then can we know which fish to choose for our aquariums while avoiding compatibility problems later on?

There is a way out of this dilemma. You may already know many of the answers and not realize it. Picture in your mind a catfish. Now picture a tetra. They are different, aren't they? And yet I did not tell you what specific fish I was talking about in either case. There are hundreds of catfish, and they differ in many ways from each other. Some are no more than 1-inch long, whereas others grow many feet in length. Still, the word "catfish" conveyed a meaningful impression. The question is, why?

The word catfish is generally accepted as the name of a group of fish that exhibit many similar characteristics. The same is also true for other groups of fishes. This then is the key to the dilemma raised at the beginning of this article. Of the many, many fishes available, the vast majority belong to just a small number of groups. You probably already know quite a bit about each group. By paying attention to these groups, you will be able to select fish for your community aquarium with a minimum of difficulty.

Scientists classify all plants and animals, including fish, according to a scheme that has as its three lowest major divisions the following terms: family, genus and species. The genus and species are the "name" of the fish in question. Each fish is placed in a family that reflects its evolutionary place in this world. In turn, the families are grouped into larger divisions. It is of value to us that this placement also normally reflects strong similarities in behavior and maintenance requirements. The vast majority of the fish available to us are members of just seven families or groups of closely related families.

This article is devoted to a discussion of these seven groups of aquarium fish. I will explain how to recognize these fish and what their general care requirements are. Before proceeding, I must mention that there are fish commonly available that are not members of any of these groups, and that within each group there are exceptions to every generalization. Nevertheless, a broad understanding of each group of fish will be of great help. The exceptions in each group are interesting in their own right — just because they are exceptions — and can provide you with great satisfaction as you learn to recognize them also.

The main groups are the tetras, the barbs, the catfish, the loaches, the livebearers, the cichlids and the labyrinth fishes. Five of these each represent a single scientific family. The other two, catfish and the labyrinth fishes, are groups of closely related families. There is another large group, the killifish, but these are seldom as available to the new aquarist and will not be discussed here. [Next Page>>](#)