

Aquarium Fish Hiding Places

Aquascaping does more than create a pretty tank, it adds important hiding places for your aquarium fish.

By Rus Wilson

Imagine having to spend an extended period in a room with no furniture of any kind. How long would it take for you to become bored and uncomfortable, even neurotic? Life in such barren surroundings is clearly not an ideal situation for humans — and the same is true for our fish. Though we may need to use bare tanks for specific reasons (such as spawning or quarantining) on a short-term basis, time and experience demonstrate that fish not only exhibit fewer signs of stress, but also become more outgoing and demonstrative of natural behaviors if they can retreat to protected areas when they feel like it.

These protected areas can also double as decor. The thoughtful placement of a moss-covered rock, an interestingly shaped hunk of driftwood strewn with Java fern or even a ceramic cast of a sunken ship can contribute a lot to the look of an aquarium as well as cater to the needs of your fish. There is a wide variety of hideaways and refuges available for aquaria. Let us consider the applications, benefits and caveats of some of the most popular hideaways.

Moss or Bushy Plants

One or more bunches of hardy, fine-leaved plants in your aquarium can provide refuge for many fish, from newly born fry to a subordinate adult. Some of the best for this purpose include Java moss (*Taxiphyllum barbieri*) or other mosses, Anacharis (also called Elodea), Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*), Java fern (*Microsorium pteropus*; especially 'Windelov' or 'needleleaf'), Guppy grass (*Najas* sp.) and water sprite (*Ceratopteris* spp.). Most of these are hardy plants that do well in low to moderate light and do not require supplemental carbon dioxide. Their dense growth provides plenty of hiding places for baby livebearers, shrimp or just about any fish.

As a bonus, their extensive surface area encourages the growth of tiny organisms that provide readily available snacks for your tiny aquarium inhabitants. If you have herbivorous fish, the old standbys Java fern and Java moss are probably your best bet, as these are often ignored by otherwise plant-eating fish. If your fish are particularly determined herbivores or your nonherbivorous fish seem to attack your plants, anyway, consider trying a thicket or two of fine-leaved plastic plants instead.

Most soft, fine-leaved plants also make a good spawning medium for fish that scatter their eggs. I have spawned egg-scatterers, such as white cloud mountain minnows and danios, in thick patches of Java moss. Danios, at least, have reputations for feeding voraciously on their own eggs, but in my experience, by the time I remove the parents, enough eggs have found their way into safe crevices to provide plenty of fry.

If you do include live plants in your tank, you will need sufficient light in the aquarium. Most aquarium setups come with hoods that are not specifically intended for planted tanks. They provide just enough light to see your fish without encouraging too much algae growth. Under these conditions, Java moss will probably do fine, since it will often thrive in no more than ambient light. Java fern is also fairly tolerant of low light, but most of the other plants listed do better with 2 or more watts of light per gallon. That said, they may do fine with less if the tank is shallow and/or the plants are allowed to float on the surface where the light is more intense.

Terra Cotta Flowerpots and PVC Piping

Though they may be less aesthetically pleasing than driftwood or natural rock caves, terra cotta flowerpots and sections of PVC pipe are a mainstay in aquaria for reasons of utility. Some species of cichlids, such as convicts and kribbs, use these caves as spawning sites. Others, such as the African Rift Lake cichlids, do best with plenty of retreats to help curb aggression, whether spawning or not. Many catfish, such as the bristlenose plecos, also prefer a long, low cavelike structure for egg-laying. If your tank is used purely for breeding, there is no need to adorn these structures, as the fish are quite satisfied for them to remain bare.

On the other hand, if you wish to improve the appearance of the caves in your tank, you can use aquarium silicone sealant to attach aquarium-safe rocks or gravel to these caves. A little imagination, some silicone sealant and some lava rock can go a long way. For a greener look, Java moss, Java fern and/or Anubias plants can be attached to the rocks or gravel with rubber bands, black cotton thread or fishing line. Once the plants gain a foothold, the rubber bands or fishing line can be removed. Cotton thread will gradually disintegrate on its own. You will eventually have a pleasing patch of greenery camouflaging the true nature of the cave with a tangle of fronds, leaves, roots and rhizomes.

Aquarium Ornaments (Sunken Ships, etc.)

Though some of us have tastes that tend more toward natural aquascapes, plenty of aquarists enjoy the effect of sunken ships, Roman columns or lurking crocodiles of resin or ceramic. As long as they are sold for aquarium use, these structures are safe, in that they will not leach harmful chemicals into your aquarium water, and many provide crevices for your fish to take refuge.

Two caveats are worth mentioning, however. Some of these ornaments have sharp edges, which might lead to injury of some fish. These edges are of particular concern to certain goldfish with exaggerated eyes, such as moors or bubble-eyes, as well as to nervous or extremely active fish that habitually dash in a haphazard manner around the aquarium. It may also be possible for some fish to lodge themselves in tight crevices of some of these structures. [Page 2>>](#)