

Be a Fish Expert

Becoming an experienced fish hobbyist isn't a straight line.

By Jay Hemdal

Perhaps your aquariums don't look as nice as you would like, or the fish don't live as long as they should. With a significant amount of time and effort, an advanced hobbyist or aquarium professional might be able to offer you the assistance you require to realize these goals. However, there is an easier and more fulfilling course of action: solve the problems by yourself. The ideas presented here will help get you started on the right track.

A beginning aquarist is generally plagued by reactionary efforts. That is, a problem becomes critical before it is noticed, and a solution must be hastily determined before too many fish are lost. Advanced hobbyists tend to operate in a more precautionary manner — problems are stopped before they become acute. Because of this, there is more time to spend working with the fish in breeding programs and for fish shows.

The difference between reaction and planning can be illustrated in many ways. One example is the use of water changes. The beginner typically performs a water change because some problem, such as a high ammonia level, has developed in an aquarium and the fish are suffering and dying. The advanced hobbyist foresees the eventual accumulation of dissolved compounds in the water as a normal part of the biology of the aquarium and performs the water change before the concentrations of these compounds become toxic to the animals.

Few would argue against the fact that the more personal experience an aquarist has, the greater the likelihood that he or she will be more successful. Sadly, this apparent truth is not always borne out. Some people are prone to accumulating a vast amount of experience, but do not learn from past mistakes. They never seem to progress much beyond what would be considered a beginner's level.

Getting beyond the novice stage can be done. I would like to show you some steps an inexperienced aquarist can follow to help ensure progression in the hobby that is as rapid and smooth as possible, from a basic hobbyist level to an intermediate stage and beyond.

The primary method one uses to become more successful in this hobby is to acquire as much information as possible. The ordinary techniques for gaining such knowledge work quite well. Your dealer will most likely prove invaluable in the beginning by supplying you with specific advice about a particular problem. For example, you wish to set up an aquarium, so the dealer answers your basic questions, such as what equipment will be required, what fish to buy and what food should be fed. At some point, the person you have been dealing with at the store will suggest other means for gaining additional knowledge, such as some specific books or aquarium magazine, such as *Aquarium Fish International*.

This phase of the hobby seems to be a major stumbling block or stopping point for many people. Some individuals may be only moderately interested in the hobby, and the advice supplied by a dealer is sufficient for their needs. Often these people wish to maintain an aquarium solely for its aesthetic value, or perhaps for its educational interest to their children. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with owning an aquarium for these reasons, many advanced aquarists would not consider these individuals to be true hobbyists.

For those with more than a casual interest in fishkeeping, there is the second step, in which the "hobbyist" takes the dealer's advice and begins to acquire a personal aquarium library, including both books and a subscription to an aquarium magazine. By virtue of reading this article you have more than likely already progressed to this second, very important stage.

The next level, step three, is another point at which some hobbyists falter. They read all the available information, but have difficulty applying it to their own situations. These hobbyists still wish to be "led by the hand," but in this case, the familiar dealer is substituted by an author they have never met.

These hobbyists struggle to assimilate the information presented and then apply it to their own aquariums. They read that they should be caring for their aquariums in a certain way, and they try as best they can to duplicate these methods. Sometimes this works quite well and a hobbyist becomes very successful. In other cases, something is "lost in the translation," and try as they might, the hobbyist cannot duplicate the effective methods outlined by the author.

Sometimes the problem lies in the type of information the reader is attempting to utilize. Hobbyists are often confused if one author seemingly contradicts the advice of another. In some situations, this is simply a case of there being more than one acceptable way to handle a given problem. Other times, one of the pieces of information presented is flawed in some way. The key here is to try and determine the merit of each individual piece of information based on solid knowledge already acquired. If, for example, you were to read somewhere that "discus fish breed well in saltwater aquariums," it would be quite easy to rule this information invalid based on your own personal knowledge and experience.

The fourth, and most important, phase of a hobbyist's development is to be able to determine which course of action is the correct one. It is here where aquarists begin to rely less and less on outside information sources to help them decide on a particular direction to take in working with their aquariums — they start solving problems on their own.

As an example, imagine the hobbyist who notices that one of his fish has ripped fins. He watches the aquarium for 10 minutes, sees no apparent aggression from any of the other fish and then scratches his head and walks away. The next day, the fish with the ripped fins is dead, having been killed by a tankmate. The hobbyist, at a loss, writes the death off as being "unavoidable." What he or she didn't realize in this case were three very important points.

First, except for instances of very strong fish aggression, the "fighting" may take place only sporadically, and during a 10-minute viewing session one is likely to miss an incident. Secondly, the hobbyist also neglected to take into account that when one sits in front of an aquarium to examine the fish, the fish are busy examining him and have ceased "feuding" for the time being. Finally, due to the inherent differences in the behaviors of individual fish, expectations concerning typical behaviors, such as aggression, might not forewarn him of the problem. In this example, the only solution that the hobbyist would have is to take the time to correctly identify the problem on his own, and in time to resolve it.

Another common problem is fish that leap to their death from an uncovered aquarium. Very often when this happens, the aquarist simply remarks "I didn't know this species would do that," and covers the aquarium to keep any remaining fish in place. Preferably, he should have researched the jumping potential of the species beforehand, or better yet, simply covered the aquarium from the start, assuming that any fish, not just the ones identified in the literature, might jump out.

An amazing number of problems can be overcome by simply noting that "something does not look right in the aquarium," and rather than waiting to see what happens, taking immediate steps to correct the potential problem. Of course, this does not imply that one should begin a potentially dangerous treatment based on little information. However, given the choice of trying a safe remedy versus doing nothing at all, one is sometimes better off trying the treatment if there is clearly something amiss with the aquarium.

In many cases, the hobbyist needs more than just visual clues. The causes of diseases, for instance, are often not visible. The use of tools, such as water test kits, allows one to "see" invisible problems — perhaps nitrite poisoning. Of course, the information in aquarium books and magazines becomes important in applying the information these devices supply by providing advice that can be directly acted upon.

Perhaps the final step an aquarist can take is to supply other hobbyists with information that they have developed on their own. Joining a specialty aquarium society is possibly the best way to accomplish this. At the club meetings and through newsletters you can pass on your hard-earned information to other interested hobbyists. At the same time, other aquarists will be doing the same, supplying you with much needed information. Writing magazine articles and even books are also possibilities. For some people, being an active aquarium hobbyist is not enough, and they progress into the realm of professional aquarium keeping, perhaps through starting their own pet store or by working at a public aquarium.

Please keep in mind that this article is not a definitive guide to becoming an advanced hobbyist. The ideas presented were only examples of guidelines to follow. This is only a start — the rest is up to you!