

Aquatic Plant Vacation

Seven tips to keep your aquatic plants healthy while you are on vacation.

By Alesia Benedict

Plants on Vacation

Whether you're cruising the Aegean or camping just down the road, here are seven tips to keep your aquatic plants healthy.

Summertime is often when we take a vacation and leave our planted aquariums for a week or two. We take vacations to relax. Truth be told, however, we often really fret about our aquatic plants and pet fish in between the R&R.

As someone who leaves her planted aquariums unattended for seven to 10 days twice a year (plus several trips of four or five days), I have learned over time what works best for me in maintaining my planted aquariums during my absence.

1) Have realistic goals. Because you won't be around to maintain your planted aquarium, make sure your expectations are realistic. Without regular trimming, feedings, front glass cleanings and the like, the aquarium is bound to look a bit on the ratty side upon your return. Understand this, and you won't be disappointed when you first peer into the planted aquarium once you are back home.

What I always strive for is maintaining equilibrium as best as I can. This equates to nothing dying, no algae blooms and minimal work for me to get the planted aquarium back to pristine shape. None of us would expect our pet fish to look amazing after such an absence, so don't expect the aquatic plants to look that way either.

2) Timers. I'm always an advocate for having aquarium lighting on timers (takes the guesswork out of everything), and never is this more necessary than when you are away. I like to slightly reduce the duration of the lights being on when I am away, because I am not around to add liquid fertilizers and the aquatic plants grow a bit more slowly. I'd much rather come home to slightly paler red plants than to an aquarium full of green water.

3) Equipment. Don't do any major equipment maintenance the night before your vacation. The best time to do a major filter cleaning is two or three days before your vacation, so that if anything isn't quite right, you can fix it prior to your departure. If you wait until the last minute, and you are working on your planted aquarium at 10 p.m. on a Sunday night and the impeller breaks, guess what? There isn't a pet store open to sell you a new one.

This is also true when replacing carbon dioxide canisters or changing a DIY yeast solution. If tubing leaks, poor seals or other problems arise, then you won't be around to prevent them from becoming major events.

4) Feedings. Many people think the best thing to do the day before a vacation is to pour a ton of nutrients into the aquarium in order to feed the plants "all week long." This is not a good idea. Aquatic plants can't take in more food than they need at any given time, so the added nutrients just contribute to buildup or worse (feed algae, etc.). If you remember our #1 goal (to maintain the planted aquarium in a reasonable condition), you will be more likely to avoid this common error.

5) Trimmings. I will trim aquatic plants that need it up to seven days before a trip. I don't trim them any closer to my departure date than that, for several reasons. First, after trimming an aquatic plant, it will sometimes go a bit into shock — maybe not so drastically that you will notice it, but enough for the plant to shed a couple of leaves. If we are around, we can quickly remove these leaves from the water column.

However, if we are not around, this debris can easily clog the filter intake tubes and restrict water movement. In addition to lower water movement, this same plant matter begins to ruin the water quality as it breaks down. Attached to the filter intake, it thus deteriorates within the water column versus being sucked out of the planted aquarium and into the filter. Nitrate readings can begin to soar with all that organic matter breaking down right in the aquarium, especially with no water changes. For this reason, if you use a prefilter apparatus, I advocate removing it before your trip. Without a watchful eye, it can easily get clogged and create all kinds of havoc.

If I'm going to replant and/or move any plants, I do so two weeks prior to my trip. This way, I can be sure the aquatic plants will not become uprooted, float at the surface and around the planted aquarium, and end up also getting sucked into the filter intake. With replantings completed two weeks in advance, I can be sure that my aquatic plants' roots take hold to keep it in place while I'm gone.

6) The dual system. As anyone who has been reading my column for a while knows, I am sort of obsessive when it comes to taking action that prevents problems versus just waiting for problems to occur and then fixing them. Although I've never been in the Boy Scouts, my motto is also "Be prepared!" This is why on a daily basis, I have a dual system on nearly all of my aquariums, which is what I strongly recommend if you're going on vacation.

Peer into any one of my show aquariums, and you'll think you are seeing double. In fact, you are! Two filters. Two heaters. Two sets of lights. Even two carbon dioxide units. I have everything set so that the total output of the equipment equals my ultimate goal. For example, rather than use one 400-watt heater, I use two 200-watt heaters. Instead of one light fixture with four 65-watt bulbs, I will use two strips with each housing two 65-watt bulbs. My two carbon dioxide units each disseminate half of the aquarium's total carbon dioxide need. Used together, they put out enough carbon dioxide to make my aquatic plants flourish.

Why this "two of everything" strategy? Mostly, it's in response to situations that have occurred while I was away, including filters that got clogged, heaters that failed and one time when my carbon dioxide canister simply failed for no apparent reason. I came home from a trip to Italy to find my favorite show aquarium absolutely covered in blue/green algae. I could not recognize a single aquatic plant; all of them were covered in black slime. It was so bad that it took a month of tedious cleanings to get the aquarium to stabilize.

Encouraged by readers to share, I wrote an article for my column about how I turned that aquarium around (hint: lots and lots of work), and I became a big fan of equipment duplicity at the same time.

7) Peace of mind. Should you or shouldn't you have someone "plant sit" your aquarium while you are gone? This depends on how much that person really knows about planted aquariums. As the saying goes, "Sometimes a little knowledge is dangerous thing."

A friend of mine had his wife care for his planted aquarium while he was on a week-long trip. She knew to only feed specific amounts of fish food to the pet fish. Unfortunately, she didn't realize her fingers often had soap, body lotion or perfume on them and that she was putting these substances into the aquarium with each feeding. Some of the pet fish died, but because she wasn't really "into" the hobby, she wasn't paying attention to the planted aquariums and didn't even realize it. So, she kept feeding the (dead) fish until more and more died. When my friend returned from his business trip his pet fish were dead, there was a ton of food laying on the bottom of the planted aquarium, the water was green and the aquatic plants were covered in algae.

If you have a hobbyist friend who isn't going to turn the aquarium lights on to keep watching the fish (and then forget to turn them off), or put their hands in the planted aquarium to remove a floating twig and unintentionally poison the water, or add some houseplant fertilizer to surprise you with really green plants, etc., then have them look in on your aquarium every couple of days if it gives you peace of mind. Personally, I've never done it. And while I did have that awful blue/green algae mess, I've never lost fish nor had an aquatic plant fail to the point where I couldn't bring it back. I have no one look in on my planted aquariums, no one feed my pet fish and no one do water changes. Yes, my planted aquariums look ratty after a week of neglect, but I'd much rather have a temporary eyesore than lots of tears from a loss.

Travel and vacations should be fun. With some simple precautionary steps, the memories won't be spoiled when you get back home.