

Guppies

Not only do guppies reproduce easily in the fish aquarium, but they come in a cavalcade of tropical colors.

By David A. Lass

If you have been keeping aquarium fish for more than the past two days or so, chances are good that you have kept guppies. One of my first encounters with tropical fish was a container of guppies that my friend's mother - we knew her as Mrs. O - kept on the sun porch of their house down the street from me in Cincinnati, Ohio. I was about 8 or 9 years old. Mrs. O had one main aquarium, I think it was a 15 or 20 gallon. The water was pea soup green, and the fish aquarium was filled - really packed - with guppies and some floating aquarium plants. Guppies can bring lots of color to your aquarium.

There were all sizes of guppy fish, from big, fat pregnant females to tiny newborns hiding in the aquatic plants. When Ms. O dropped some fish flake food on the surface of the fish aquarium, the water boiled with hungry, feeding guppies. On both sides of the fish aquarium were all kinds of glass bowls (pickle and mayonnaise jars and other containers), each filled with more guppies.

Apparently, Mrs. O didn't know what to do with her rapidly expanding population of guppies, so she put them into whatever containers she could and gave them away. Unfortunately for young friends of her daughter, she adopted a policy of checking with parents first before sending a kid (including me) home with a bowl or jar of guppies. My parents declined on the dubious excuse that I wasn't ready to take care of fish. However, I so often and so unmercifully pestered my parents that on my 12th birthday, I got my first freshwater fish aquarium, all because of what Mrs. O and her guppies had started.

Why the Guppy?

The guppy has a lot to offer as an aquarium fish. It's very hardy and easy to keep, as long as you give it decent water conditions, a stable environment and decent fish food. It comes in what seems an infinite number of colors and varieties. The list of guppies available from Singapore - the largest producer of guppies for the aquarium trade - fills two to three pages. Guppies are prone to producing mutations and variants - "sports" as they are called in the hobby. Because they can produce each generation in a matter of months, breeding and hybridization programs for guppies are fairly easy to put together.

Guppies can be purchased for 10 cents each for "common" or "feeder" guppies all the way up to \$25 to \$50 or more for a trio (one male and two females) of top-quality fish. Most stores sell guppies by the pair, but many are now offering males and females separately at different prices because male guppies are by far more colorful and showier.

A Short History of the Guppy

There is perhaps no freshwater fish in the aquarium hobby that has had a more convoluted and confusing history than the guppy fish. The best source for a detailed history of the guppy can be found in the newly revised edition of *The Toy Fish - A History of the Aquarium Hobby in America - The First 100 Years* by Albert J. Klee (published by Finley Aquatic Books, Pascoag, Rhode Island). I'll give a brief summary here.

The guppy was first described by Peters in Berlin in 1859 as *Poecilia reticulata* from Venezuela. In the same year, Robert John Lechmere Guppy sent some guppies from Trinidad to Guenther at the British Museum, who promptly decided that they were a different species and described them as *Girardinus guppii*. As proof that the "my name is better than your name" game is not something that contemporary ichthyologists invented recently, during the next 40 years or so, a number of scientists described guppies they "discovered" as new species. Klee gives more than 20 names (including misspellings) that have been hung on this little fish over the years.

In terms of the hobby, in the early 1900s, guppies were being raised in Germany and England, and by the 1910s, the fish had reached the United States. Shortly after WWII, the first guppy societies were holding shows and developing many new, different strains. Now guppies are bred by the millions all over the world. They can also be found all over the world in many bodies of freshwater (or even a little brackish) as they have been purposefully - and perhaps foolishly - introduced to control mosquitoes and other insects that have a water life stage. (This practice is considered unwise because guppies are so prolific, and will usually out-compete any other native fish in their niche/feeding guild.) They also have appeared in many places as the result of accidental (one would hope) releases from the aquarium hobby and commercial breeders.

One final brief note on guppy species: There is a fish in the hobby known as Endler's livebearer. It was introduced from the wild in 1937 and is currently still in the hobby. Males are very similar to male guppies, although with somewhat brighter colors and green metallic spots not normally seen on male guppies. The jury is still out on whether Endler's is a separate species or a different type of guppy. Endler's livebearers are sufficiently different to be accorded the status of "rare" fish, and while kept by many hobbyists, they are infrequently seen in stores. If you do obtain some Endler's, please be very careful not to allow them to mate with regular guppies - just to keep them "pure," in case they are finally and definitely judged to be a species of their own.

Keeping Guppies

One of the reasons guppies are so popular and there are so many of them in the hobby is that they are so hardy and adaptable. The "secret" of keeping guppies is to start with healthy stock (more about this later). Assuming the fish you start off with are healthy, guppies are basically undemanding. They prefer a pH of around neutral (7.0), but can adapt down to 6.0 and all the way up to the high 7s (approaching 8.0). Hardness should be moderate, although they can handle hard water fairly well. They do not respond well to very low hardness. Temperature should be in the low 70s (Fahrenheit), but they tolerate down to the low 60s and into the high 80s.

As with most fish, the values for pH, hardness and temperature are not as important as the conditions being consistent and not subject to wide swings over a brief period of time. The better the water quality, the healthier your guppies will be, although they can exist in less-than-pristine water, as long as the conditions deteriorate slowly over time. As with all fish, guppies do best with a regimen of frequent water changes - 10 to 15 percent every week or 20 to 25 percent every other week.

When it comes to fish food, guppies are not picky eaters. Their natural food is small insects and crustaceans, which is why they have been used so extensively for mosquito control. In the aquarium, they will eat just about anything presented to them, and very rarely will they refuse any kind of food. They should have some live plants they can nibble on (hornwort, Egeria or water sprite) and should be fed prepared foods that have a high vegetable content, such as Spirulina. Frozen or live fish foods of appropriate size are, of course, taken with great gusto. Next Page>>