Fish and Fish Tanks as Christmas Presents or Birthday Presents

Category : Beginners Articles
Published by Suey2 on 2/12/2010

An article from FK member suey2 advising on the purchase of fish and aquariums as a gift for someone.

A note about Fishkeeping.co.uk

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Back to the article!

Are you thinking of asking for a fish tank for Christmas? Or your birthday? Or giving one as a gift? Take a few minutes to read through the information here and hopefully you, your loved ones and your intended fish can have a happy and healthy set up and provide for the future, rather than making a mistaken purchase which will prove expensive and potentially harmful in the long run.

If you are giving one as a gift, has the recipient ever shown any interest in fishkeeping? It might sound a strange thing to say but if they have never shown any interest, are they really going to want a fish tank? Will they want to put in the time, effort and money to do it properly? Will they want to spend time each week maintaining the tank?

There are a huge amount of things to cover which would be impossible in one article so the intention here is to give you some background information and some things to think about to help you in your decisions. If you have any questions feel free to post in the forum and someone will be able to help out.

Up and running for the big day?

If the tank and fish are to be a Christmas present, the first and most important thing to realise is that if you haven't started a fundamental preparation called 'fishless cycling' with the fish tank by the start of November then you won't be able to have fish in it for Christmas. Tanks take a while to 'biologically' get ready to receive their new residents. 'Fishless cycling' is the most important thing in getting a new tank ready so keep an eye out for references to it across the forum.

Here is our article about fishless cycling:
Click here for our article about fishless cycling

If you are too late to get started in time for the set up to be ready on the day, don't be downhearted.

If someone asked for a jigsaw they wouldn't want you to do it, frame it beautifully and present it to them all finished - part of the fun is in doing it for yourself and then admiring your finished work. There's no point in rushing setting up a tank or trying to cheat nature and skip stages; the only thing you are likely to end up with is ill or, worse, dead fish and no one wants that for a present! Good things happen slowly in fishkeeping so take your time to get it right.

A note about animal welfare

Fish are covered by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. You have a duty of care towards your fish and other aquatic animals. "Duty of care" is a legal phrase which means that someone has an obligation to do something. Prior to the Animal Welfare Act 2006, people only had a duty to ensure that an animal didn't suffer unnecessarily. The new Act keeps this duty but also imposes a broader duty of care on anyone responsible for an animal to take reasonable steps to ensure that the animal's needs are met. This means that a person has to look after the animal's welfare as well as ensure that it does not suffer. The Act says that an animal's welfare needs include:

A suitable environment (how it is housed)
A suitable diet (what it eats and drinks)
The ability to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
Any need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease

More information can be found in our thread about fish welfare and your duty of care:
Click here for our thread about fish welfare and your duty of care

What sort of fish and tank are right for you?

Fishadmin has written a short introduction to fishkeeping article:
Click here for our 'short introduction to fishkeeping' article

There are a few things to consider when deciding what sort of fish and tank to go for.

Space

First, how much space can you give to a tank? Have you already got a suitable stand or will you need one? Remember, one litre of water weighs one kilogramme so don't underestimate how much your tank will weigh. Be wary of small tanks, 'fashion' or 'theme' tanks, or fancy-shaped tanks. Traditional tanks have stood the test of time for a good reason. Be very wary of 'coldwater' or 'goldfish starter kits (or any type of starter tank kit come to that!). Manufacturers use the word 'starter' for a good reason - the tank will certainly start you off in fishkeeping but will last only a matter of months before the fish will outgrow it.

Water

You need to know what sort of water you have. Is it hard water or soft water, high PH or low PH? This will make a big difference to the sort of fish which will be happy living in it. You can buy kits to test for yourself but you can also take a sample to a good fish shop and ask them to test it for you. The three things they should be able to tell you are PH (potential of hydrogen - how acidic or alkaline the water is), GH (general hardness - refers to the dissolved concentration of certain minerals in the water) and KH (carbonate hardness - this tells you how easily the water will be able to keep its PH stable). Ask them to write down the exact results for you so you can research at home for yourself. Don't let anyone convince you that any fish will be happy living in any sort of water. You want your fish to thrive, not just survive.

The following link will give you more information about PH:
Click here for an article explaining PH

Budget

How much do you want to spend? Initial set up costs are one thing but don't forget running costs. You'll also need things like food, replacement plants (if you have 'lawnmowers') and water conditioner on a regular basis. If you don't mind second hand, eBay is a great place for bargains, especially if you can't afford a new tank of an appropriate size. Also check out Freecycle if you have a group in your area.

Fishy-Fishy has written an article about what sort of equipment you will need. This will help you get an idea of how much you need to budget for:
Click here for an article about fishkeeping equipment

She has also written an article about choosing the right tank and filter:
Click here for an article on choosing the right tank and filter

As well as a financial budget, don't forget to budget for your time. The tank will need weekly maintenance.

What sort of fish?

Now you've had a think about space and budget, and you know what sort of water you have, you can start to think about what sort of fish will be right for you. Remember, the fish has to enjoy living with you as much as you enjoy keeping it.

How many fish do you want?

If you are buying for children will they want a fish each for example? If you need quite a few fish it would be better to look at fish that stay small. Be wary of tank manufacturers' stocking suggestions; many will imply or suggest you can keep far more fish in their tanks than you actually can. When deciding on fish you need to plan for the maximum grown adult size of the fish. Remember, the ones in shops are babies.

Coldwater, tropical or marine?

Goldfish are possibly the most commonly bought pet fish but don't be fooled into thinking goldfish can live in small tanks or bowls, or that they are 'beginner fish'. "Goldies" are great fish but they need very big tanks, when looked after properly can live for over 15 years and are no easier to keep than most tropical fish. Equally, don't be fooled into thinking Bettas (Siamese fighting fish) can live in vases or that "Nemo" (Marine Clown fish) will be easy to keep.

The following article explains the difference between coldwater, tropical and marine:
Click here for our article explaining coldwater, tropical and marine

At the bottom of the above article are some helpful links to other articles with more information.

If you are thinking about goldfish, make sure you read this article about their potential size, life expectancy and tank requirements:
Click here for our article about goldfish size and life expectancy

We have lots of 'caresheets' for all sorts of fish. The caresheets detail the fishes' requirements so take some time to read through them to help you decide. All our caresheets are here:
Click here for Caresheets

Accessories and decor
Fishy-Fishy's first article (above) explains all the accessories you might need; here is the link again for reference:
Click here for an article on accessories and equipment

Decor can be all manner of things. Take some time to choose the right decor for your fish. Remember, their needs will dictate the 'look' of the tank as much as your 'interior design' plans. It's better to get it right from the outset than have to try and change things like gravel at a later stage. Don't impulse-buy ornaments or other tank items until you have checked these will be compatible with the fish you wish to keep. Besides, that multi-coloured gravel might seem a good idea now but will you still like it in six weeks?

Live plants might seem a little scary to the new fishkeeper but don't be put off. There are plenty of easy plants to get you started and the fish will like them a lot more than plastic ones.

Shopping!
Once you've decided on the right set up you can get shopping. If the tank is to be a gift you might like to ask the recipient if they would like to help choose. But don't let them sway you from your careful research and planning! And remember, the fish are 'window-shopping' only at this stage.

Fishless cycling
Yes, it's that again. Here's the article again - it is very important so forgive the repetition!
Click here for our article about fishless cycling

Once you've got your 'hardware' (tank, filter, plants etc.) you can start 'fishless cycling' your tank. In the weeks that your tank is 'cycling' you can do some more research and plan the layout. If you are involving children get them to plot the results of the daily water tests on a graph so they feel part of the process and understand it better. Most members on FK use the API Master Test Kit. The best place to buy this is eBay. There is a kit for freshwater (coldwater and tropical) and one for saltwater (marine) so make sure you choose the right one. It will do a lot of tests and lasts for ages, plus you can buy individual new tests if one runs out.

4-6 weeks later and your 'fishless cycle' should be completed (your test results will tell you) - now it's time to go shopping for fish!
You should have done all your research and chosen your fish by now. Whatever you do, stick to your plans. Don't buy anything on the spur of the moment and be careful about anyone in a shop telling you anything different to your independent research. Ask them to explain their reasons, and unless you are 100% convinced, stick to your guns. Please don't get the impression that we don't trust shop staff; some are excellent but some are not. It's always best to research for yourself and check with someone independent (like this forum) who doesn't want to sell you anything.

If you are unsure, walk away and don't buy anything from the shop. You can always use our forum to double check anything a fish shop has told you and then go back another time.

Make sure you know the latin name of the fish as many have 'common names' which can vary and

may lead to you buying the wrong fish by mistake. For example, Hillstream Loaches are sometimes known as Hong Kong 'plecs'. Hillstream Loaches are small and have very specific requirements. 'Plec' can also mean a member of the plecostomus family. Some of these can grow over two feet long! Imagine accidentally buying several fish that will soon turn into monsters you hadn't planned for!

And finally...

Fishkeeping is a fun and rewarding hobby when done properly. We hope the information here will help you decide if it is the right hobby for you and/or the intended recipient. As mentioned above, if you have any questions feel free to post in the forums here. There are lots of helpful and knowledgeable members on FK who will be happy to help out. We all started somewhere so don't be shy.

Happy fishkeeping!