

## Extreme Aquarium Make Over

Have you ever looked at your aquarium and wished that you knew what to do to bring that sparkle back? In this article, we will discuss the steps necessary to take your tank from being that boring tank in the corner to something that will draw people to it like a magnet.

As an example, I will use one of our recent projects. Our client wanted us to transform her tank into something that she would be proud to show off. The subject was a 125 gallon salt water tank that was set up using a combination of a few pieces of live rock and some plastic plants. This type of set up is sometimes called a quasi- reef. This usually means one of two things... 1. They couldn't decide if they wanted a reef or fish tank, so they tried to have both, or 2. They could not afford to do a full blown reef tank, so they settled for some of the creatures and a few fish as a compromise without investing in the key components to be successful with a reef tank. Regardless, both were doomed to fail.

### **Step 1. Commit to a Fish theme.**

You must commit to a certain group of fish achieve long term success. Whether you choose to have a fresh water community tank or a reef tank, do it right. Don't try to mix styles that don't go together. For example, Gold fish and tropical fish or the worst I've seen, Mollies and Salt water fish. There are many types to choose from but, choose one, and only one at a time. You can always set up another tank to try something new.

Some of the fish themes we use are:

Fresh water community

Salt Water community fish with artificial corals

Monster fish

Fancy Gold Fish

African Cichlid

Discus and Neon Tetras

Live Planted Tank

Reef tank

Aggressive Fresh water fish

Aggressive Salt water fish

And within each of these themes there are almost endless possibilities. You are only limited by your own creativity.

In our example tank, we choose to use Salt water community fish with artificial corals.

### **Step 2. Make sure your Filter is up to the task.**

Our example tank was running on a canister filter and a small hang on the back filter. Not adequate for a salt water tank. We installed a new Wet/Dry filter with a 1200 gph pump. Take a close look at what you have for filtration. If you skimmed on the filter, for example when you first set up your tank, now is a good time to make an upgrade. But, it is important to run the old filter for a couple of months until the new one has an established bacteria system. I also recommend upsizing to the next size filter. If you have a 40 gallon tank, get the filter that is rated for 55-65 gallons or more. It will not cost that much more and you will benefit from the extra head room. Water circulation is a key to a healthy aquarium. We like turnover rates to be 7-8 times per hour for fresh water and 12-15 for salt water. So, if you have a 40 gallon fresh water tank, make sure that the filter has a flow rate of at least 300-400gph.

### **Step 3. New Gravel will make your tank look fresh.**

At this point it is usually easiest to drain the tank first. Keep the fish in buckets while you are working but, make sure to aerate the water with an air pump while you are working. It is also wise to save as much water as you can to make re-introducing the fish easier. After you have the water out, remove the old gravel and replace with your new choice. We always try to create an environment that is

natural looking, so we are in favor of using Natural Gravel for fresh water aquariums. You will quickly tire of the un-natural looking died gravels. Crushed Coral and Sand are a must for salt water tanks. Whatever you wind up using, make sure to rinse thoroughly first.

#### Step 4. **Get some new furniture**

This is where it starts to get fun! And, what make over would be complete without at least a few pieces of new furniture? Or, in this case, aquarium décor. This is where you will make your biggest impact. This is also a good time for those of you who want to have an authentic, geographically correct tank, to go deeper with the fish theme that you chose in Step 1. You, of course do not have to do this to have a beautiful aquarium. Your tank can be stunning by following a few simple guidelines that I will show you.

In our case, we choose to do a coral reef replica tank. Our client wanted lots of color and what better way to do that than with coral replicas? Whatever you decide is up to you but, I will break down the process we use to create some very eye catching displays.

We usually ditch most or all of the décor when we do a makeover. If we keep anything, it will only be used as an accent piece and not a focal point. You want the tank to look entirely fresh and new, not just re-arranged.

A. **Start with a good foundation.** We use a variety of different types of rock depending on the look we are going for. In this case, we used Lace Rock (also called Bowl Rock), to create an interesting reef base.

This is an excellent choice for most small to medium sized salt water set ups. It is also a good choice for fresh water aquariums too and, it won't break the bank. Pick out a variety of different sizes and look for ones that have lots of holes. We use 1/2-3/4 lb. per gallon of tank size. Example: 50 gallon tank = 25-37 lbs.

Begin by using the biggest pieces first. Locate them across the rear of the aquarium, interlocking them to make them look natural. You should also try to avoid making one continuous linking structure. It is more interesting if you

have 2 or 3 islands. It also gives the fish multiple points to swim to and from. Next, use the smaller rocks to make bridges and caves by connecting some of the larger rocks with some of the smaller ones. Make sure it is solid and locked in place before moving on. Use caution here! Do not stack rock too high! Avoid the temptation to create something that could fall and break your tank. I have seen this happen first hand and it isn't pretty. Besides, it does not have to be tall to look good, be safe.

**B. Bring in the color.** In our example, we used artificial coral but, the same design principals apply if you are making over your fresh water tank. **Just like with the rocks, start with the largest pieces first. You should also look for one or two pieces of coral to use for your main focal point. Place this piece (or pieces) in the middle or best position on top of your rock stack, making sure to put the base down inside the rock a little so it will look like it is growing out of the rock, not sitting on top. I like to use a tall and branchy piece as my focal to create some contrast between the low and high spots.**

Next, start to fill in the nooks and crannies with the smaller pieces. These all play a supporting role to the main center piece. Mix and balance colors and texture, creating multiple areas for the eye to explore.

Lastly, step back and look at your new creation. You want to make sure that it satisfies all of the visual elements of proper design; balance, focal point, color, interest, depth. Now, relax and enjoy your new masterpiece!