



Ornamental fish keeping

YOUR GUIDE TO KEEPING FISH
HAPPY AND HEALTHY



Animal Welfare Foundation

www.bva-awf.org.uk

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession

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Ornamental fish keeping

Many people find it very satisfying to keep a wide variety of species and types of ornamental fish, not only for their beauty but also to have a small part of 'another world' in their home.

There is a lot of information you need to know before purchasing your first fish and this leaflet will help you decide which is the best fish for you and will give you crucial advice in order to keep your fish healthy.



What should I know before buying fish?

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, owners of pets, including ornamental fish, in England and Wales have a duty to ensure that any animals they are responsible for remain healthy and happy. In broad terms, the Act makes owners and keepers responsible for ensuring that the welfare needs of their animals are met.

These include the need:

- For a suitable environment
- For a suitable diet
- To exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- To be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- To be protected from pain, injury, suffering and disease

This may sound daunting, but ornamental fish keeping is a fun and interesting hobby and meeting the needs of your fish should be satisfying and enjoyable. Remember, if in doubt, your vet or a fish specialist will be able to advise you.



What type of fish should I buy?

Ornamental fish can be broadly divided into two categories: freshwater and marine fish. Freshwater fish may be further divided into coldwater fish, such as goldfish and koi, which are the easiest and most popular to keep, and tropical fish, such as tetras or gouramis. Ornamental marine fish are generally tropical fish, such as clownfish and damselfish, and are generally more expensive and difficult to keep than freshwater fish. Before you buy your fish, it is important to think about which type of fish will suit your budget, and your lifestyle, and whether you would prefer an aquarium or a pond.

As a rule, the cost of the set-up, time required for routine maintenance and the knowledge required for successful fish keeping increases from coldwater to tropical and from freshwater to marine.

There are thousands of types of fish which can live together happily, but you must make sure that different fish are compatible before mixing species in the same tank or pond so that predation or bullying does not occur. You should also consider the size of certain species and whether your pond or tank can cope as it is essential that you can provide the right environment for your fish.



Where should I buy my fish?

Always purchase your fish from a respectable retailer, preferably one registered with the Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA). This will ensure that the fish are from a reputable source, that they have been checked for the absence of disease and that they have had a sufficient quarantine period — minimum 21 days.

When choosing your fish, you should ask your retailer how long the fish have been on the premises and whether they have a health plan in place. Look for fish that are active, have no marks or blemishes and have a vibrant colour. It is advisable to speak to your vet or fish specialist before you make your purchase and never buy on a whim.

What facilities do I need?

The facilities you need to keep fish depend on the type of fish you have decided to keep and whether they will live in an aquarium or a pond.

Aquaria

Your vet or fish retailer can help you decide on the type of system, fish and life support system that will be best for you. Go for the largest aquarium you can afford/accommodate as larger volumes of water are much more stable in terms of water quality. Also check your water quality, pH and hardness before choosing your fish, as this will dictate the species that are going to be best for you.

The location of your aquarium is very important, and ideally it should be kept away from direct sunlight (to stop algae growing), in a quiet area (to avoid noise or vibrations) and at a constant temperature (fish do not like temperature changes).

Ponds

You should use an experienced pond constructor or seek expert advice if you are building a pond. Consideration needs to be given to the size, construction materials, types of life support systems (pumps, filters, aeration, ability to carry out water changes, water quality testing, how to keep predators such as herons away) and any necessary garden landscaping.

The location of your pond is very important. If possible, ponds should not be:

- Near trees (leaves pollute the water)
- In direct sunlight (fish can get sunburnt)
- Below a raised flower bed (weed killer and other contaminants may wash in to the pond)

How do I maintain my aquarium or pond?

Once installed and filled (using a water dechlorinator or conditioner) you must allow the water in the pond or tank to settle. Also the biofilters need to become active—you can purchase filter starter kits from your aquarist supplier. You should wait at least six weeks after filling your aquarium or pond before introducing any fish to allow the filters to mature and avoid ‘new pond or tank syndrome’ caused by the bacteria in the filters being unable to cope with the fish’s waste. Fish should then be introduced gradually over a period of 12 weeks.



Water quality

Water quality is the key to successful fish keeping. A pond or tank is a closed system and waste products must be removed or water quality will deteriorate and fish can become ill. Commercial test kits are widely available and easy to use. It is essential to use test kits, they are a necessity to care properly for your fish.

You should routinely test the water pH, ammonia, nitrite and dissolved oxygen levels. Additionally you may need to test for phosphates, alkalinity or hardness depending on your particular situation — when in doubt contact a specialist for advice.

Partial water changes may also need to be carried out to remove toxins that build up in the system. Remember tap water contains chlorine which is toxic to fish. Chlorine can be removed by using a tap water conditioner or simply leaving the water in an uncovered container for 24 hours.



Plants

Plants form an integral part of the nitrogen cycle as well as contributing oxygen to your fish's water. Plants provide food, shelter and general environmental enrichment—even being used as a nesting area by some fish.

Ask your vet or at your fish specialist for the best plants for your fish. Take care when buying plants as snails or parasites may be present on them and you do not want to introduce these creatures to your pond or aquarium.



Does the time of year make a difference to fish care?

The time of year has little effect on indoor systems, but it can have a major effect on outdoor ponds. Fish activity depends on the water temperature in which they live — as temperatures drop, fish activity decreases. When the pond temperature drops you should feed your fish less frequently and stop feeding altogether at temperatures below 10°C (50°F).

A floating pond de-icer is a good idea in the colder months as it will prevent ice forming on the surface of your pond. A couple of days of ice should not cause any problems but you must never break the ice as the resulting shock waves in the water may injure or even kill your fish. If you have an unexpected cold snap and are concerned about ice formation, a simple method to thaw the ice is to place something warm (a pan of warm water for instance) on the ice to cause it to slowly melt.

Hot summer weather can also bring its share of challenges. High water temperature can greatly reduce oxygen levels in the water so check your fish for any signs of gasping or crowding round inlets. Provide aeration and reduce the amount of feed being given.

What should I feed my fish?

Most fish will thrive on commercially available diets, but some species have very demanding requirements and this should be checked before purchase. Feeding small amounts frequently is best and is one of the keys to maintaining good water quality. Overfeeding is a common problem; therefore, you should only feed the amount that your fish will consume within three minutes and feed very little in ponds during the winter months.

What should I do if my fish become ill?

If your fish appear to be unwell, you should seek professional advice and begin treatment as soon as possible.

The following signs may indicate that your fish have a disease or that there is something wrong with their living environment:

- Skin lesions, such as ulcers
- Abnormal behaviour, including flicking or scraping, which can often indicate the presence of external parasites
- Fish trying to congregate near the water inlet
- Abnormal swimming and balance problems
- Protruding eyes (exophthalmia)
- Protruding scales (also called 'pine cone effect' since it can be associated with abdominal enlargement such as ascites)
- Also, sadly all too common, sudden death

Avoid the temptation of simply putting treatment chemicals into the water as often water quality is a major cause of illness. Changing a third of the water may improve the water quality. A number of the popular chemical treatments which are supplied for treating bacterial problems in fish also kill the micro-organisms in the biofilters, making the original problem worse.

Where can I get advice?

The Fish Veterinary Society will be able to provide you with the name of a specialist fish vet who will be happy to offer advice — its website is www.fishvetsociety.org.uk. Alternatively your local retailer may be able to help you decide what is wrong with your fish and which treatment to use. However, some drugs, such as antibiotics, can only be obtained from your vet.

Can I release my fish into the wild?

Ornamental fish should never be released into local ponds or streams. It is illegal, dangerous to the environment and a risk to your fish as they may not be able to survive in a foreign environment.





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