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AN INTRODUCTION TO STARTING A SALTWATER AQUARIUM

Have you seen the gorgeous photos of the fish and marine life showcased on page 68 of this issue? Wouldn't it be great to have an aquarium full of those rascals, so you could enjoy them every day? We love saltwater aquariums—they are beautiful and you can go down to the beach and catch your own wildlife to stock them. But what exactly goes into buying and maintaining a saltwater aquarium? We decided to find out.

To get things started, and to learn the basics, we spoke with **Stan Hauter** of About.com's Saltwater Aquarium forum (www.saltaquarium.about.com). Stan and his wife Debbie have a great web page full of answers to most aquarium questions. Stan started out by telling me that in the saltwater aquarium

A bullnose saltwater aquarium by Tenecor.

field, experience is everything. He said the only way to get good at saltwater aquariums was by doing. This mantra was echoed by everyone else I spoke with, so I'm going to assume it's true.

Stan explained that there are three basic types of saltwater aquariums: fish only, fish only with live rock (FOWLR) and reef tanks. Fish only is easy to understand. Just fish, no live plants or coral. FOWLR is live fish, but with pieces of dead coral that house live flora and fauna and beneficial bacteria. A reef tank is a step up, and contains live coral. Each step up, from fish only to FOWLR to reef tank, requires more expertise, more time and more money.

A fish only tank is easiest. You have to make sure you have the basics, and fish that don't find each other tasty. With the other two kinds, you need to make sure your fish

don't eat each other and don't eat your live rock or coral.

The basic hardware required of these systems is similar, with the biggest difference being the type of lighting required. Fish only don't require sophisticated lighting, while live rock requires a little better lighting, and reef tanks require very good, specialized lighting.

The first piece of equipment you need is the tank itself. Tanks are made out of either glass or acrylic. Glass is cheaper and heavier, acrylic is lighter, more expensive and scratches easier. Stan has a page on his website that shows you how to build your own 55 gallon glass tank. Stan learned to make his own equipment while living for ten years on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. He couldn't get any equipment on the small island, so he had (**See aquariums on page 80.**)

lower blood pressure is just one of the benefits of an aquarium

to make his own.

For those who prefer to purchase a tank, there are numerous manufacturers. I spoke with **Keith Young, Vice-President of Consulting Services of Tenecor Aquariums** (www.tenecor.com), one of the biggest tank manufacturers in the world. Keith explained that Tenecor builds over 800 tanks a week, and sets them up so they keep their customers happy and in the hobby. Tenecor focuses on

to keep the water from becoming toxic from fish waste. The better filter you buy, the fewer problems you have and the more fish you can keep in the tank.

You also need lights. **Greg Morgan**, co-owner of **Reef Geek** (www.reefgeek.com), a California based company that specializes in aquarium lighting, explained the different kinds of lighting available. There are three basic kinds, fluorescent, metal halide, and

action. The wave action is optional but helps keep debris from floating to the bottom by suspending it in the water where it can be removed by the filter. It also gives the fish exercise!

When you set up your tank for the first time, you'll have to let it stabilize. This involves letting beneficial bacteria grow, and to let the water reach the right temperature, salinity and PH. This takes around six weeks normally, but Stan recommended a product that speeds up the process immensely, named Right Now Bacteria from Hiatt Distributors.

After you have your tank set up, you'll need to perform maintenance. How much depends on how well you set up your system and what kind of tank you have. Reef systems can require an hour a day; fish only, as little as five minutes a week, plus 30 minutes every month for a major cleaning. And for those who don't have the time, there are companies that will come to your house to set up your aquarium and will service it twice a month.

Cost varies widely. Obviously, size and type of tank make a big difference. Greg said just the purchase of a 55 gallon tank can vary from \$300 to \$1500. Stan says you can expect to pay around \$1000 for a nice 55-gallon system.

No matter which way you decide to go, you'll have to learn quite a bit about the equipment needed and the chemical functioning inside the tank. With a little effort, you can have a spectacular saltwater display with exotic fish and corals. If the desire for that gorgeous tank is rising, there are several ways to make it happen, from building it yourself (Stan's site has a great on-line class to walk you through) to hiring others to build and service it. Since aquariums are proven to lower blood pressure, it may be a cost effective investment of time and money. And you can actually find Nemo!



high quality systems that make maintenance easier. They do high-end aquariums, all the way down to ten-gallon systems. Tenecor counts among its clients The National Aquarium, The New York Aquarium, The Key West Aquarium, The Waikiki Aquarium, The Alaska Sea Life Center, and The Florida Aquarium. Keith suggested a glass aquarium for smaller tanks, and acrylic for larger. Glass tanks are easier to clean without scratching.

The next component for your aquarium is a filter system. Both Keith and Stan emphasized filtration as the most important piece of equipment. You will need mechanical filters

LED. Fluorescent lighting has different variations, and can be very high output, but still power efficient. Metal Halide is very bright, but uses a lot of power and produces a lot of heat, which can be a problem. LED lights are the future of the industry. They are low heat, low energy and long life, but are now still a little pricey. If you want a reef tank, you'll need to have some of his high quality lighting - corals have specific light needs.

You'll also need a water pump or two; one to circulate the water through the filtration system, and one to move the water around inside the tank to simulate wave