

Why have caves and rocks ?

Caves and rocks give fish a sense of security by having a retreat when stressed. They make fish feel safe from predators and bullies. They reduce the directions from which they might come under attack. They give surfaces for cave spawning fish and makes it easier to guard eggs. Fry instinctively hide in the nooks and crannies for survival. Rock piles give cichlids lots of options so there is less need to fight over any particular cave. This results in happier, more relaxed, and less aggressive atmosphere within the tank. For rift lake cichlids, limestone and slate are essential to recreate the look of their natural environment and maintain the high pH and hardness of the water.

Will my fish love caves ?

Most cichlids, plecos, corys and loaches will be very thankful. For dwarf cichlids, caves and crevices are an absolute must for survival in a community tank. Caves will generally be ignored by most live bearers, barbs, tetras, danios, and other schooling fish. Angels, discus, and most of the larger South American cichlids just want a flat surface for laying eggs.

What kind of rocks to use ?

You can use lava rock available from your local fish store or landscaping supply. Lava rock or tufa is lighter than most rocks and the rough surface makes them easier to stack than smooth, rounded stones. Flat slate pieces are readily available at your local fish store or landscaping supply. Limestone and blackstone are also available at the landscaping supply. Other good looking but more expensive options are zebra stone, pagoda, petrified wood and Texas holey rock (honey comb limestone). They look nice to start, but eventually get covered with green or brown algae.

If you collect rocks from your back yard, boil them for a few minutes, then brush them vigorously, then boil and brush again. Avoid rocks with green stains, indicating copper, and rust stains indicating iron. Try pouring some vinegar or lemon juice on the rock. If it fizzes, do not use it in your aquarium. Collect quartz, usually white, and granite, which is pink or white with black specs, and basalt which is black. Plain grey rounded potato sized rocks are usually ok, shiny mica is ok. Make sure the rock is not metallic by seeing if a magnet is attracted to it. Beach stones usually have smooth edges from years of water action, but they are difficult to keep stacked for any length of time.

Digging cichlids may cause an avalanche. Glue together a rock structure using aquarium safe silicone (black or clear), not kitchen and bath that has a fungicide built in. Set large rocks on the bottom of the tank, sitting on flat slate or a closed cell foam sheet. The structure must sit for a few days to set the glue before putting it in an existing set up, or adding the water for a new aquarium.

What else can be used ?

Black and white PVC plastic pipes and elbows can be used. Sometimes they float, so glue rocks, sand and gravel to weigh them down, and to make them look more natural. Avoid black ABS, it may release harmful compounds. Driftwood can be used in soft water, low pH environments.

Clay flower pots and clay pipes make excellent caves and hiding places. Clay pots can be purchased at garden centres and hardware stores. Clay pipes of various shapes and sizes can be purchased at a building supply. Square clay pipes can be stacked. Flower pots can be tipped over, giving one large entrance. Some fish prefer two entrances, so put on eye protection and use a hammer to carefully break out the bottom. This requires patience and practice, make sure you have a couple of pots to practice on. An alternative is to drill a few holes and then use a ceramic tile blade in a jig saw to cut off the bottom. Use a round file and sandpaper to smooth the edges. If you want to drill a hole in the side, pre-soak the pot before drilling. Use a round file to enlarge or shape the hole. The pot can be placed upside down, but an entrance has to be created by breaking, cutting or drilling.

Beware of buying ceramic or glazed candle holders or other ornamental items at dollar stores or garage sales. They may contain lead or other toxins. There are test kits available at your local hardware store. Your local fish store has lots of aquarium safe options.

If someone you know does ceramics as a hobby, ask them to make some caves based on your design. Think of a cereal bowl or flower pot upside down with an entrance or two. Take the fantasy route with a castle or sunken ship. Make sure that non-toxic clay is used. A glaze is optional, but make sure it is non-toxic as well.

Cave building is just another fun part of the tropical fish hobby. Enjoy.