

Before I begin this article, I feel it is necessary to first give you an introduction as to how I got into this wonderful hobby. Without giving my actual age away, let me say that many years ago as a young teenager I became interested in keeping tropical fish. I can vividly remember going into the local department store on Bridgeport Road in Waterloo, Ontario and would always be magically drawn to the Tropical Fish section of the store. Once there, I would wander from tank to tank with a big smile on face, no doubt caused by my fascination with the fish in those tanks.

It was here that I decided to wet my fingers so to speak and get into this truly wonderful hobby. Back in those days there was no internet and the hobby certainly was nowhere near, what it is today. I remember asking my Dad if I could get a small tank and keep it downstairs. His simple answer was yes, as long as I knew what I was getting into and that I take care of my fish. Sounded simple enough to me.

It does not get any better than this I thought and with that in mind, I set about purchasing a small 10 gallon tank setup complete with stand, incandescent lamp, 25 watt heater, box filter and air pump. I even got a small bag of gravel and fish food. Everything I needed except water and fish. Nobody ever told me you needed to cycle a new tank. I was simply told to fill it with tap water, bring the temperature up to between 75 and 80 degrees and add fish. Celsius had not even become part of our daily lives yet here in Canada.

I took this 10 gallon setup downstairs to our basement and eagerly set everything up near a plug outlet and proceeded to fill it with warm to the touch tap water and check the temperature. Did I mention I had also bought fish already? Yes, unknown to me, I had come home with two large **Pterophyllum scalare** (Angel Fish) and one **Corydoras aeneus** (Albino Catfish). I checked the temperature on the thermometer and it was right at 75 degrees, so I proceeded to plug in the air pump and turn on the hood lamp. About 1 minute later in went the three fish I had been patiently waiting to put in. The water was so clouded from all the dust that came off the new gravel that I could barely see my fish but I could make out their shadows.

I sat back on the sofa and marveled at my how my new finned pals were literally zooming around the tank. I thought they were just scared and getting used to their new homes until 2 hours later both Angel Fish were dead and the Albino Catfish was hiding behind the box filter. The catfish lasted the night and I found it dead the next day. Obviously, I was upset at what had just happened. The sad part is I never thought I had done anything wrong; I thought it must have been the fish were weak or sick when I bought them. So back to the department store I went my three dead fish sealed in saran wrap for a refund. Here I decided that I wanted to try **Paracheirodon innesi** (Neon Tetras) instead as maybe they were more hardier. They certainly looked good, so they must be healthier than my previous fish.

I came home with 5 one inch long fish and promptly placed them bag and all in the tank. Nobody told me you had to wait for the temperature of the bagged fish to equalize, to add some tank water to the bag etc. I simply turned the bag inside out and let the Neon's loose. Well, they lasted a whole 3 days. No doubt, some of the toxic Ammonia had a chance to out gas from the water and they only had to deal with almost as deadly Nitrites.

Oh, I neglected to mention, that nobody ever told me about test kits! In all fairness though, there was literature available that would have informed me of the obvious horrors I was creating but who reads books when you are 13 years old? I did, but like so many youngsters, I found looking at pictures more fun. I should have known better but those first few hurdles taught me some valuable lessons, many of which I still carry with me today.

Later that day, I hopped on my bicycle and placed the dead fish in the carrier above my rear fender (we used to call them rat-traps in those days) and headed back to the department store. As I rounded the turn off Margaret Avenue onto Bridgeport Road, a little sign caught the corner of my left eye. "Bridgeport Aquarium"...Hmmm I had never seen that before. I wonder how long they have been there (turned out to be a long time). How neat is that I thought? Someone must be selling fish and aquariums out of their house.

Not being shy, I zipped my bicycle around and drove up the driveway and saw the sign on the side door. Little did I know I had stumbled upon one jewel of a store. I can vividly remember walking down the spiral stairs to the basement, marveling as I saw all these fish on display. The man (later I would learn his name was Bob Daniels) was busy bagging fish for a customer and the older woman whom I would later learn was Bob's wife Dorothy was busy with customers at the till. Bob approached me and asked if he could help me.

Well I proceeded to unload my story about how I bought my first tank and fish only 4 days ago at the department store down the road and how both batches of fish had died. Did he know why this might happen I asked him? 30 minutes later, Bob had explained to me all about Ammonia, Nitrites, Nitrates and even a little bit about different types of fish and which ones were quite hardy. I was so happy to have an obvious expert spend a few minutes talking to me. Bob told me to bring a sample of my water in for testing before I bought anymore fish. This was the beginning of a few years worth of buying fish and even two more small tanks from Bridgeport Aquariums.

As I turned 16, I had become interested in driving and other things so my desire to keep fish became less and less important. Eventually like so many of us have done when we first got into the hobby I cleaned my tanks out and left them in the garage eventually to be sold. Now some 29 years later (oh there you go, I have given my age away) I am more interested than ever in this hobby.

One day last year as I passed through an office on the way to my own office, I noticed one of my co-workers had a neat little 2 ½ gallon hexagonal tank on her desk. This was the spark that re-lit my aquatic flame. This little tank was completely self sufficient having a heater, under gravel filter and lamp. In that tank was a male Siamese Fighting fish aka **Betta splendens**. Although 29 years had gone by since I last kept tropical fish, the first thought I had was how happy our two kids would be having their very own fish tank. They had been asking about having their own pet but we thought we would wait a year or two first.

Giving them their very own little aquarium would allow them to have a pet and learn some important values along the way. A quick call home to check with the boss, aka my wife, and I was off to a local retailer to buy one of these complete setups for the kids to enjoy. This is where it all began again. I walked around the LFS (local fish store) and marveled at all the different setups. How things had progressed, I thought as I walked the aisles. Back home, I arrived tank in hand and called the kids down to see their new aquarium.

First thing the kids said was that they both wanted their own Betta. Oh oh...here we go! And away we went. The rest is history as they say. Back to the LFS I went, family in tow and we ended up buying a small Betta tank and some decorations for my stepdaughter and my stepson got to keep the 2 ½ gallon for himself. They both chose Betta's and back home we went. Each tank had the water treated for Chlorine and Chloramines as well as some beneficial bacteria starter to get things going.

That same night, I mentioned to my wife about my first foray into Tropical fish and how I still found it very interesting. I do not think it was 24 hours later; I called her at home and mentioned I was looking at the website of the LFS and that they had some decent deals on complete 25 gallon tank setups. I think it was no more than 2 hours later and Sherry called me at the office to let me know she was at the LFS and what did I think about us getting a 25 gallon kit? Needless to say, I said it sounded excellent and when I got home later that day, there was our brand new tank in a box. Now all of us were excited.

We eagerly unpackaged everything and had the tank up and running within the next 2 hours. I proceeded to follow the enclosed instructions very carefully and two weeks later we were out purchasing our very first fish that we would call our own. Guppies and Swordtails were our first purchase and it was not until they had given birth that we knew we were doing things somewhat properly. So where do we put the fry? I wonder if we take my stepson's tank and use it for the fry, would he like his own 10 gallon tank?. You should have seen the look on his face. And so our journey continues. My stepdaughter had her Betta tank coming along nicely, my stepson had his own 10 gallon tank complete with his Betta and some Zebra

Danios and we had our bigger tank and the fry. Well, the fry kept coming and they needed a bigger and better home so another 10 gallon was purchased for them to grow up..

All these fish and no place to keep them led me to decide that we needed to purchase a much bigger tank. So, a few months later we were now up to a 65 gallon tank. We purchased a nice wood stand and canopy and it really looked good in our living room. As I read more and more on the internet I was becoming much better at understanding the many angles of this hobby. I recall one night wondering if there was a local tropical fish club. I was quite happy to find indeed there was one and that night we decided the whole family would join KWAS. What better way to enjoy a night out together and learn some things along the way.

We found the club to be full of knowledgeable, friendly people and my stepson loves the “name that fish” part of our meetings and of course the raffles. My stepdaughter never did quite get the “bug” and has moved on to other things but her little brother sure has taken a liking to the hobby. He has named all his fish after his favorite X-Box game Halo. As fall approached I had decided it was time to try my hand with live plants as this seemed like the logical progression of things. Planted tanks looked so natural. All the reading in the world did not prepare me for the onslaught of algae I was about to face.



Don't get me wrong, I had done a lot of research into this but not really being willing to accept all that I had read (big mistake) I went ahead and added just a few plants to our otherwise beautiful tank. Here is a picture of what our 65 gallon tank had been looking like when we just had artificial silk plants. Within 3 weeks of adding the first few live plants, the tank was an absolute mess. Every night I was pulling out more and more hair algae. The substrate began to get a thick green carpet of algae. No matter what I tried nothing seemed to help. Frustration set in and by this stage there was no way to reverse the process without completely pulling the tank down and starting all over again without live plants. Not being one to give in that easily, the fact that the algae had won

really never sat well with me and I was bound and determined to master the art of aquatic gardening!

Reading and more reading, talking to other club members and finding some very knowledgeable news forums on the internet led me back to the LFS to purchase specialty substrate, lots of fast growing plants along with good plant fertilizer and proper lighting. I had also read numerous times how using Co2 is often the last straw in putting the puzzle of a healthy planted tank together. At about this time, we also decided that our 65 gallon show tank just was not quite tall enough in our living room so I convinced my wife that we needed a 90 gallon tank. This had the same footprint as our 65 but was a full 6 inches taller. So with the 65 gallon tank pulled down and put away, I prepared the new iron rich substrate for the 90 gallon tank.



Not wanting to spend a few hundred dollars on a fully pressurized professional Co2 system, I decided to give it a go on my own and against what a lot of people said wouldn't work, my dual 2 litre pop bottle setup was indeed the missing ingredient in our planted tank. The results were exactly what I had hoped to achieve. The only problem was the Co2 would last about one week and then it was time for a fresh batch. Fortunately this setup kept the PH level at 7.2 and everyone was very happy especially my plants.

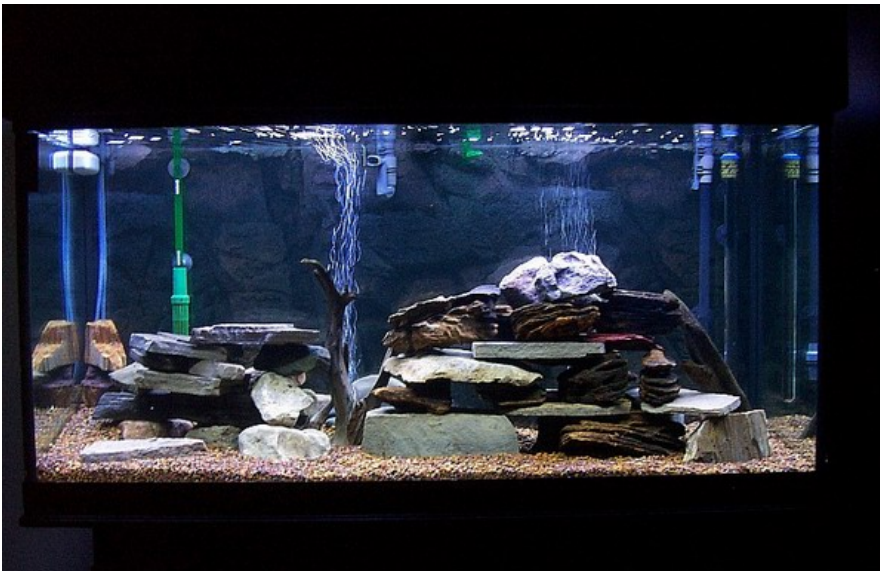
Looking back on my experience with setting up a large planted tank, the key ingredients for me were **a)** fast growing plants that are able to compete with algae for nutrients **b)** iron rich substrate giving the plant roots plenty of food and not allowing the algae to feed on it **c)** the correct amount of lighting approximately 1.6w/gal for low to moderate plant light requirements and lastly **d)** Co2 injection. One very positive side to having a heavily planted tank was that the water remained so clean. The Nitrates were very low almost non-existent as the rapid plant growth would absorb a large portion of them from the water column just exactly as I had read and been told. I should add that I had some plants grow over 24 inches in less than a month with this setup. Having finally achieved a decent level of success I felt really good about this.

Some time after we had this tank growing plants, it was at a monthly Kwas meeting that a fellow member had brought in one of his African Cichlids for the jar show. I found it to be a very interesting fish and decided to bring home some books from our club's library and begin researching to find out just what all the talk was about these African Cichlids. I had overheard many club members talk about these fish and I had heard that because our local water parameters were so good, keeping African Cichlids was very common. Perhaps it was the red warning labels I would see on the tanks at the LFS, but for some reason until I had begun reading about these fish, I thought they were all natural born killers.

Nothing could be further from truth. Yes there are some species of Cichlids that are extremely aggressive and predatory but there are numerous ones that most of us are more than capable of caring for in a Cichlid community setup. My reading led me to want to try the Mbuna species from Lake Malawi. Why Mbuna? Well primarily, there are a number of Cichlids from this lake that have stunning colors and I also liked the idea that the Mbuna species are quite fond of a rocky habitat. After extensive reading I asked Zenin, our club's exchange editor and a Cichlid aficionado, if he would mind helping me make the change over from planted community tank to Cichlids. Zenin eagerly accepted my request and together we planned out a strategy.

Early one Saturday morning, Zenin arrived at my place and we systematically dismantled my 90 gallon planted tank. Zenin took some of the plants and 5 of my SAE's in trade for some of his **Iodotropheus sprengerae** (Rusty Cichlids). We bagged all of my Rainbow fish as one of the LFS's had told me he would take them all on trade towards my Cichlid purchase. The tank was cleaned top to bottom and we vacuumed the fluorite thoroughly to remove any left over plant roots and detritus.

Both of my canister filters were dismantled and cleaned and then the rocks were carefully placed in the tank. The tank was filled up and I then added my 5 **Botia macracanthus** (Clown Loaches) into the tank and let things settle down for a week before any Cichlids were purchased.



A week later, I picked up Zenin early Saturday morning and we went shopping for my first Cichlids. At our first stop in Ingersoll at Aquarium Cent\$, I picked up 5 *Melanochromis mainganos*, 5 *Labidochromis caeruleus* and 3 *Pseudotropheus estherae*. That took care of most of the species I was looking for and Zenin even found an additional

fish for his Malawi tank. This was our first trip to the dealer in Ingersoll and both of us were very pleased with what we saw. The owners are very friendly and knowledgeable. Even though this was not the most popular time for them to have Cichlids, because they are also into ponds etc, they had a decent selection of both adult and juvenile fish to choose from. I know Zenin and I will be back for a visit in the fall. Both Zenin and I were able to ask one of the co-owners a lot of questions, she was more than happy to take the time to answer all of them. We packed our fish in our insulated carriers and from Ingersoll we were off down the 403 to visit The Tropical Fish Room in Brantford. Gerry Draper, who owns the store, is also a club member. There at Gerry's store I found the last 3 fish I wanted, some Metriaclima zebra's to complete my first ever African Cichlid tank.

Eager to get back home, both Zenin and I wasted little time in bidding Gerry a fond farewell. I dropped Zenin off at his house first and promptly got home and began the careful process of acclimating all of my fish to their new home. I immediately placed each bag into the tank and allowed them to come to the temperature of the tank water then added a good amount of the tank water to each bag of fish. This allowed any toxic ammonia that had built up to escape and also let the fish become better acclimated with their new home's water condition.



Bag by bag I gently released my new friends until they were all in the tank. It did not take very long before everyone was exploring their new home. Even my 5 clown loaches, which had been in hiding most of the previous week, were out and about like nothing ever happened. I witnessed them swimming around with different Cichlids and at one point I thought that they might just think they are Cichlids as they were so happy. To this day, they are just as happy. The Cichlids have found their own territories and each and every night I am amazed when I watch their unique behavior. Cichlids truly are in a class of their own and I encourage anyone who

is sitting on the fence like I was to give them a try....with a little bit of research and some careful planning you too can enjoy the magnificent rock fish of Lake Malawi.