Aquarium Maintenance While You're Away

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

who's minding the aquarium?

When you're away for the weekend or on vacation, you ask a friend or neighbor to stop in and feed your fish. But sometimes you must leave for longer periods, such as for military service or an extended vacation. When this happens, you need a committed aquarium caretaker willing to become familiar with aquarium basics.

before you leave

Planning ahead ensures your aquarium stays in peak condition while you are away. Before you leave, address the more-involved or higher-ticket aspects of your aquarium system. Your lighting system is a good place to start. Check to see if it is operating properly and if you haven't done so in a while, now is the time to replace old bulbs in your aquarium light fixture.

Also, stock up on essential items such as filter cartridges, filter media, food, test strips, water conditioners, and salt mix. Having aquarium essentials on hand not only simplifies things but also reduces any out-of-pocket expenses for your caretaker. Remember, your caretaker is doing you a favor so make things simple and hassle free.

If possible, a fellow hobbyist would be the ideal canidate. However, if your caretaker is unfamiliar with aquariums invite her on several occasions to observe while you perform routine maintenance. Give her a notebook to jot down the tasks, as well as tips and suggestions to make things go smoother. The following is a basic aquarium checklist for your caretaker.

caretaker checklist

✔ feeding

If your caretaker insists on stopping by daily, or lives in your home, manual feeding is a great option. Show her the amount you feed and explain the perils of overfeeding. You can also install an electronic feeding device to automate this task in the event your aquarium caretaker is unable to stop in every day.

✔ weekly maintenance

Show your caretaker how to test for ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH, and other vital water parameters. Dip-style test strips are easy to use and produce almost immediate results. Explain what the results mean and make a chart indicating "normal" water parameters for your aquarium. After each test, have your caretaker record the results to monitor water quality. Let your caretaker know that regular testing provides cues to potential problems with the biological filtration and other processes. A chart makes it easier to detect patterns at a single glance.

Show your caretaker where you keep your algae-scrubbing tools like magnets and scrapers, and encourage their use before water changes. Take her step-by-step through a partial water change. Explain how water changes help rid your aquarium of harmful chemicals that compromise water quality.

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✔ monthly maintenance

Here's where your efforts to stock up on filtration supplies pay off. Demonstrate how to make safe cartridge changes. All electrical apparatus inside the aquarium should be turned off while performing any aquarium maintenance. Inform your caretaker that chemical filter media should be replaced, as well. Many chemical filter media such as activated carbon need to be gently rinsed to remove excess dust before placing into the filter.

Allow your caretaker to assist you with gravel bed cleaning using your siphon-style cleaner. Explain that partial gravel cleaning is done during a water change to remove excess debris, usually monthly, but doesn't have to be performed with every water change.

Though biological media does not require replacement, it should still be inspected monthly for signs of clogging. Show your caretaker how to rinse clogged bio media using aquarium water to minimize loss of beneficial bacteria.

✔ bi-monthly maintenance

This part of the maintenance is more of a system-wide scan to ensure your equipment is working properly. Check the moving parts of the filter to make sure everything is working properly and there isn't any excess wear or any damaged parts. This is also a good time to brush off any debris, clean the exterior glass and lighting fixture of mineral buildup. Have your caretaker look behind your aquarium to dust the cords and tidy them up if they've become jumbled; making sure plugs and tubing connections are secure. Also, check to see if the system is receiving proper ventilation.

recommended products

A Mag-Float is an ideal tool for cleaning algae off the inside of aquarium walls.

Even a novice can easily change the cartridges on the Emperor 400 Power Filter.

Coralife Digital Thermometer gives you accurate temperature readings so you can monitor aquarium water temperature with ease.

Marineland Aqua Timer keeps your lighting on a consistent schedule while you're gone.

Ekomixo Automatic Feeder ensures a regular feeding schedule and prevents food from clogging.

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