

Interview with Antonio Nikolic

It's one thing to aquascape, but Antonio Nikolic takes aquascaping to another level. He has demonstrated time and time again his ability to master nano layouts. This aquascape in focus features his nano aquascape entitled "Natural Mystic". We asked him about his experience and inspiration, and here's what Antonio had to say.

Q: Tell me about yourself and how you got into planted aquariums.

A: My name is Antonio Nikolic. I am 24 years old and I am from Croatia. I started with this hobby almost 2 years ago, when I first came across internet photos of planted tanks created by the master himself, Mr. Takashi Amano. As I searched for more and more aquascapes designed by him, I became more inspired (obsessed) with planted tanks. His artistic work amazed me so much that I started looking at aquarium plants and planted tanks in my local area.

From the very beginning, small nano aquariums attracted my attention. They were small, intimate aquascapes that were affordable to create and posed a great artistic challenge. My first tank was 30 liter aquarium designed with some hardy aquatic plants and a small school of Rasboras espei.

Q: Describe how you developed the hardscape for your aquarium.

A: The hardscape consist of rocks and twigs placed in the midground. I took great care to place the tree branches within the substrate so that they would appear as natural as possible. I prefer the look of wild nature layouts more then the manicured garden design. I wanted to make the branches seem like they fell genuinely. As time passed I imagined the twigs becoming overgrown with plants to form a perfect home for new aquatic life. I used rocks helps to anchor the tree branches in the substrate, and as the plants grew in the rocks became nearly invisible within the aquascape.

Q: You definitely achieved the effected you wanted with the hardscape placement. What inspired the initial vision of your layout?

A: I found inspiration for this layout from the local thicket near my home. As I was searching for new decorative materials for my aquarium I saw several aspects of nature and wood pieces I liked. I couldn't think of anything better to use to create my slice of nature then "real" materials found in an actual natural environment. Knowing that the pieces I use came from the place of inspiration makes my aquascape more authentic. I think using real life materials embodies the spirit of nature in every aspect the design and layout. For this reason, I named the aquacape "Natural Mystic" just like the Bob Marley song.

Q: With such lush growth from your plants what is your fertilization method?

A: From the date of setup nearly six months ago I didn't have a routine in fertilizing. The first month of setup, I didn't even add any fertilizers and just did regular 50% waterchanges about every two days.

This past month I began adding in fertilizers more regularly because I noticed some plant deficiencies. I have started dosing microelements and adding potassium, and experiment with the Perceptual Preservation System (PPS-Pro) method. I am now dosing; 1.5 ppm KNO₃, 0.2 ppm PO₄, 15 drops Seachem flourish and 7 drops of Easy-life Easycarbo, every day.

I have more nutrient dosing experiments to observe before I get into a regular routine of dosing. The only thing routine in my schedule is the 50% waterchanges about twice a week. Since every tank is different I have to figure out what fertilizer

values works best to grow the plants in the color and condition that I envision.

Q: Let's talk plants and aquascaping. How do you keep up the plant growth and maintaining the aquascape layout?

A: I have to trim every 10-12 days to keep the plants from looking overgrown and ruining the hardscape effect that I worked tirelessly in designing. In this layout I have used more than 15 different species of plants, 7-8 species as larger (main) groups, and others plants as accents.

The midground consist of slow growing plants including *Monosolenium tenerum*, *Anubias barteri* var. *nana* 'Petite', *Taxiphyllum alternans*, *Fissidens fontanus*, *Microsorium pteropus* 'Windelov', *Microsorium pteropus* 'Narrow'. These are attached to rocks and twigs to anchor them down. The slow growing midground makes up the densest part of the aquascape, and doesn't require much attention. Since I don't have to touch the midground plants, the focus point of the aquascape keeps its overall shape, even when I have to trim the background plants.

The stem plants I placed in the background need the most frequent trimmings. For the background, I like to use fine leafed stems placed near the rear of the glass. This stem placement in the back achieves a greater depth perspective for the viewer by drawing the eye to the colors and finer leaf shapes that contrast distinctly with the midground plants.

Q: Tell me some of your greatest challenges with the aquascape?

A: My greatest challenge was been keeping the lush coloration in red stem plants. I kepted on getting stunted growth from the stems of *Rotala wallichii*. After trimming them, the bottom part rearly throws out side shoots. After struggling to get it to grow the way I wanted, I decide to replace it with *Rotala rotundifolia*. I'm happy that I did that. After adding in a double dose of Flourish regularly, the plants grew with great coloration.

Q: Now that you have overcome your challenges and completed this aquascape what other projects do you have in stored for the future?

A: Well, I'm working on several larger tanks right now, and I'm waiting for the right moment to display them. I'm looking forward to getting a new digital camera so I can truly capture the beauty of the tanks from my perspective.

I will always have one of my smallest aquascapes "El Naninjo" to keep me busy. Nano aquascapes are a challenge and pleasure to create. I sometimes think after I'm done, "Wow I did that?" It is my hope to inspire and add to the creative "think tank" so that other aquascapers (new and old) can push that envelop for aquatic aquarium designs.

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