

Interview with Peter Kirwan

Overcoming aquascaping boundaries and limits, Peter Kirwan shares with us how he mastered creating the intricate hardscape seen in his featured aquascape entitled "Mountainscape".

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

A: My name is Peter Kirwan, I am 44 years old and I am from Ireland. About 3 years ago I became interested in the planted aquarium hobby. During these three years I have learned a tremendous amount of information, and with practice have accomplished some nice aquascapes. When I was younger, I had kept aquariums on and off but these were fish only aquariums. I had always imagined plants as being too difficult attempt so I never really bothered too much with them. Then one day while browsing the web I came across some pictures of beautifully aquascaped planted tanks and they intrigued me, how had these been done I wondered.

After investigating a bit further I discovered a whole new world opening up for me, a new passion had begun. I found a whole scene dedicated to aquatic plant and aquascaping. I found forums with aquascapers evolving the art of aquascaping in a way that I never imagined existed. The more I looked at the journals and photos of these aquascapes the more I wanted to get involved. From looking at some the pictures on the web and I knew almost immediately that I wanted my own piece of nature in my living room.

Q: Looks like you got bitten by the planted aquarium bug! How did you start out learning the art of aquascaping?

A: Well like many other beginners, I set out to grow aquatic plants as fast as I could. I put larger amounts of lighting over the tank that I had, put in a few plants and within a short space of time had lots of algae. I did not let algae defeat me though. I persevered and spent some time learning the basics. Once I managed growing healthy plants, I then started my first real attempts at aquascaping. Its been an enjoyable journey since then.

Q: Now all your perseverance and developing skills landed you a spot as our Aquascape in Focus. How did you come up with the idea for this aquascape?

A: My main idea for this aquascape was take a small tank and give it a grand sense of scale and perspective. I wanted the make the aquascape resemble a real mountain scene. I knew that given the size of the tank, the planting options would be limited and better off kept simple with just one plant type. I imagined the mountain scene would have the feel of being off in the distance somewhere like looking at a picture of the Alps in spring or summertime.

I could go on to describe how I was inspired by some beautiful landscape but this wasn't the case here. The inspiration came in part from a couple of rocks in my possession. I tend to do a lot of dry runs with different rock layouts, for future aquascapes, and it was during one of these exercises that the idea came to me of doing the mountainscape. These

rocks had nice pointed features to them and after configuring them in different arrangements, I could see the potential for a mountain type scene. Once I came across the idea I knew immediately I wanted to try and portray a mountain scene in an aquascape.

Q: What types of rocks did you use and how did you manage to create the sloping effect in your aquascape?

A: The rocks used here are Seiryu rocks or mini landscape rocks that I have collected over the last couple of years. I would buy maybe 5kg's here and there until I had built up about 25kg's of rocks in total for my collection. In this layout I would say I have used about 20kg's of rock.

The substrate is ADA Aquasoil, but it is basically mud at this stage. I used it in so many different rock layouts before this one, and because of my rough handling, the aquasoil has broken down, but it still grows plants fantastically well. For this aquascape the compacted Aquasoil was perfect for me to use as I was able to tightly pack the mud around the rocks. I found if you let it dry out a little before adding water it becomes the right consistency for shaping and usually retains that shape under water. This allowed me to create the nice high slopes that I wanted.

Underpinning the aquascape are a couple of large rocks against the tightly packed ADA Aquasoil mud. I didn't have to use anything else to hold the foundation together. Although it only happened once, the only issue with using the Aquasoil mud was water clouding when rearrange rocks and plants. But a quick water change would put it right. Other than that, the slope grade has held its shape magnificently.

Q: Many aquascapers have tendencies to fiddle with their aquascape. How did much of the aquascape developed on its own as opposed to you intervening?

A: The aquascape was built up over the course of a few weeks. As the HC grew in, the front planted section with the large frontal rocks stayed intact the whole time; I didn't change anything here. The rocks at the back section were swapped and changed around a few times as I tweaked the aquascape to find the best combination of rocks for the scene. I would make changes and leave it for a couple of days and then come back and make more changes. It took quite a few goes to come up with the best combination. To finish off the rockwork I broke up a couple of rocks in my collection with a hammer and chisel to fill in some of the smaller pieces, this worked quite well for me.

The HC was originally planted about a centimeter apart in small bunches, at week 4 it had fully carpeted the tank and at this stage I trimmed it back hard and about two weeks later I took the photographs.

Q: In a tank of your size, you must have encountered some challenges, no?

A: The greatest challenge was the rock layout itself. This was challenging in a small tank and sometimes I wished I had used a larger aquarium. The depth of the tank from front to back was the most limiting for me at only 30cm so I made life hard for myself in that respect. Every centimeter of retail space counted as I tried to achieve the feeling of depth and scale in the aquascape.

Other than that, maintenance on the tank was rather easy. I used a good amount of light over the tank during the grow out period which kept the HC compact. I also performed 50% water changes on this tank every 3-4 days during this time. Though changing the water this frequently is excessive, I wanted to avoid any potential algae issues.

Because of the intense lighting scheme, and frequent water changes I was able to avoid algae problems throughout the lifespan of the scape. Though I cannot say for certain that water changes kept algae at bay, it certainly did not do any harm either way.

Q: What is in stored for the future of this aquascape?

A: Since these photos were taken I have moved this aquascape into a bigger tank and hopefully I have made some improvements to it as well. The size of the original tank limited the ability to place the rocks and plants. Now that it's in the larger aquarium, I have made a few improvements to the aquascape. Depending how it turns out I may enter the "Mountainscape" version 2 into this year's ADA competition. Time will tell though.

I only moved the aquascape a few weeks ago.

Lock stock and barrel, I moved everything, made the changes and replanted the HC. It is still early in the aquascape to see if it will work out the way I would like it to. The new larger tank certainly gives me a lot more room to design more rock formations and patterns.

Q: After a successfully completing your aquascape, how has your aquascaping tool belt and outlook changed?

A: I tend to look at nature in a different way now than I did before I took up the aquascaping hobby. I think once you get into the spirit of aquascaping, nature takes on a different persona. You become more aware of your surroundings, and notice the finer details that provide inspiration for the next scape.

I would say that I am hooked on the aquascaping hobby. I started off with one tank but now I have four tanks of of all sizes! I usually only manage time for two smaller aquascapes at a time though. This hobby can definitely grow in more ways than one if your not careful!

I admit the hobby does have its frustrating moments, but with patience the final product is very rewarding.

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