A Beginner's Perspective

Contributed by Shawn McBride

Aquascaping has captured the eyes and imaginations of many. From the moment I saw pictures of various aquascapes I knew I wanted to create something like what I had seen. So began my journey into the hobby that has since reawakened my passion for art and nature. In the series of articles for the AquaScaping World Magazine my column will focus on my journey as a budding planted aquarium enthusiast to an aspiring Aquascaper.

First, I will share a little about myself to help you understand what brought me to this hobby and how I discovered aquascaping. I have always been fascinated by nature and as a child would often catch any living creature I could find and attempt to recreate its natural world. Often times this would lead me to ponds, lakes, and streams. As I grew older I began keeping aquariums. I'm sure many can relate to the feeling of walking into the local fish store as a kid. If you are in this hobby it is an experience many of us have in common. For years I kept various tanks filled with the typical fish: swords, tetras, bettas, plecos, and at one point three large Oscars. These tanks also had the typical decorations: tacky plastic plants, fake logs, and even a skeleton sailor who drank rum when the bubbles filled his jar.

One day I found myself bored with the same decorations and travelled to the local fish store to see what new items I could find. While there I began looking at the few live aquarium plants and decided to purchase them. I eagerly planted these into my tank and sat back to admire my work. I liked what I saw, but my admiration turned sour after several days when I discovered my fish acting strangely. My angels were gasping at the surface and others showed signs of stress. Soon I began to experience losses. The tank that had been stable for a couple years was no longer in equilibrium. I tried many things to regain stability but with no luck. I decided to transfer the remaining fish to an old 20 gallon tank and start from scratch with the 37 gallon aquarium. I now suspect that through planting I may have stirred up anaerobic pockets within the gravel substrate leading to oxygen deprivation, stress, and disease. This mishap was a blessing in disguise. While searching the internet for what may have gone wrong as well as ideas for what to do with my tank I stumbled across pictures of the most amazing planted aquariums. I wanted to create something similar inside of my aquarium.

My first problem was where to begin. All I had were pictures, great for inspiration, but not helpful in more practical matters, such as equipment, plants, and the overall process. I continued to peruse the internet searching for information. I looked at ADA contest websites and found specifications regarding equipment used in each particular aquascape, some of which I had never heard. Carbon dioxide injected into an aquarium? What? Plants named by genus species, all of which I did not know. Lighting equipment, flow and filtration specifications all puzzled me.

I knew I had to learn more, so I dove into reading, reading, and reading some more. Absorbing as much information as possible is my first suggestion to those beginning. This also comes with a word of caution.

There is a lot of misinformation to be found. An example of me falling into the misinformation product traps was latching onto the concept of substrate heating cables. I went as far as purchasing a cheaper set of them only to discover through various reliable sources that the concept of heating cables is bunk. Plants roots do as good of a job, if not a better job, at transporting oxygen through the substrate. Anyone want to buy some substrate heating cables? There are many products out there intended to make money off of the naïve or misinformed, beware of snake oil. One should always be a critical thinker and this skill is helpful as a beginning aquascaper.

Upon finding Aquascaping World I knew I had come across a home to many experienced aquascapers who were willing to share their knowledge and experience. I read every issue of the Aquascaping World Magazine, I browsed the forums, ingesting as much information as possible. I found various members and moderators who were knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful. Jur4ik (Juri) was always there to answer a question and I owe him a lot of credit for what I have learned.

My second piece of advice is to use the forum! I posted every question as I formulated a plan for my tank. I posted a chemical analysis of some substrate, I made many posts about equipment, plants, critiques of hardscape, hardscape materials, and the list goes on. Most members can relate to what a beginner goes through as they, too, were once a novice. Hopefully what you have learned will aid you in sorting good information from the misinformation or, worse yet, the dogma that can sometimes plague advice given with good intentions.

Another member whose information is useful is Tom Barr, a respected aquascaper with a background in plant biology. He operates a site called The Barr Report. This site was extremely helpful as well, but is not as beginner friendly as Aquascaping World due only to the extensive amounts of more "technical" information. Articles are research based and the information is based in practice and sound experimentation, which leads to definitive answers and methods regarding aquatic plant care. This fact is important because the findings can be generalized to more than one particular tank where someone found success with a particular method.

As I learned more I began to realize that my dreams of a stunning aquascape were not a realistic goal for a beginner. A high tech tank with loads of lighting, injected CO_2, and demanding plants just wasn't feasible.

Many of the aquascapers whose aquarium layouts I had admired had years of experience and practical know-how. These were not the first scapes they had ever created. These people had learned how the plants grew, how to care for them, special requirements, trimming techniques, methods for combating algae, among many other nuances that come along with experience. No matter how much I read I could not gain experience through it.

There are, however, the few rare examples of people who have found exceptional success as beginners due to their artistic backgrounds in areas that translate well to aquascaping, such as art, photography, design, and horticulture just to name a few. One such aquascaper is US/Japanese aquascaper Steven Chong whose natural artistic eye and talent allows him to create the most spectacular, natural and balanced aquascapes even in his early years as an aspiring

aquascaper.
Aquascaping has worked in reverse for me. Recently I went on a vacation and found myself viewing photographs with a critical artistic eye; the way I would analysis an aquascape. Where are the focal points? Is this interesting to look at? It has made me a more critical casual photographer (I'm using "photographer" loosely as I am just a guy with a camera).
For most of us, learning to become an accomplished aquascaper is a process, one of experimentation, of successes and failures. How long the process takes depends upon one's goals, background, and experience in aquarium keeping. A low tech tank with less demanding plants may be better suited for someone with limited experience, whereas the high tech tank can require more care and leave less room for mistakes, which in turn would require more experience for success.
My suggestion is to start out slowly and expect bumps in the road. View setbacks as a learning experience and one more step closer to that masterpiece. When learning to drive a car one doesn't start on the Audubon with a high performance machine. You must walk before you can run, in a sense. Our enthusiasm as beginners can prove a difficult beast to tame; I still wanted that stunning tank.
In future articles I will share my experiences as a "beginning planted aquarium hobbyist" with my 20 gallon tank, which I refer to as my "practice" tank. With this tank came the many struggles and questions of a beginner. How to introduce CO2 into the aquarium, what substrate to use, how much flow and filtration is needed, what fertilizing routine works for me, why aren't the plants growing well and of course what to do with all this algae?
I will also discuss the development of my first high tech scape and how the elements of design became a focal point (pun intended) of its development. I hope that by sharing my journey into the aquascaping and planted aquarium world you can learn from my experiences and become a better aquascaper with me.

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