

Saltwater Aquarium Basics by The Salty Dog Shop

We constantly hear, “Oh, it’s too much work,” or “My _____ did it years ago and it was so hard.” These misconceptions about this wonderful hobby are thankfully finally out dated and can be put to rest. The truth is, it’s really not hard and it doesn’t require that much work. Below we will go through the basics of setting up a saltwater aquarium.

Day 1-Place aquarium and stand in an area where you will frequently look at it (out of sight will mean out of mind). Also be sure to place it away from any direct sunlight, this will significantly help to control algae. Add around 1 pound per gallon of live rock (base rock can be substituted), construct it in a way that creates the most caves without touching any of the side glass. The benefit of utilizing the live rock is it holds all of your biological filtration (good bacteria) and makes your system much more stable and user friendly. Add ½ of a pound to 1 pound per gallon of fine reef grade sand. Crushed coral is a big no-no. Give the sand a very good rinsing unless it is “live sand” in that case you can pour it straight into the tank. Fill tank with Reverse Osmosis water (available at the store for 50 cents a gallon, or you can buy your own unit that can hook up to most kitchen faucets and utility sinks) that has been mixed with 1 cup per 2 gallons of water to achieve a specific gravity (salt level) of 1.025 and set the heater for 78 degrees. Filtration will vary greatly from setup to setup but ideally you are looking for 10-20 times water turnover per hour. For example a 20 gallon would need at least 200-400 gallons per hour of water flow.

Day 7- Bring in a water sample from your tank (or buy one to have it on-hand) and if everything tests out you will then add a cleanup crew that will help control algae and eat any leftover food when you begin to add fish. A cleanup crew normally consists of hermit crabs, snails and emerald crabs. We recommend putting a cleanup crew after your tank has cycled and your first water change has been done. This can happen as early as Day 7 or it could take longer, as it all depends on how your particular tank cycles. The amount of water that should be changed thereafter should be 10-20% a week (20 gallon tank = 2-4 gallon water change per week). Mix the salt with room temperature/warm reverse osmosis at least 12 hours before you want to do the water change, proceed to do a water change like you normally would where you vacuum the sand.

Day 14-If your cleanup crew has done fine and your water tests out good again you are ready to add your first fish. Hardy fish like Gobies, many Cardinalfish, and Clownfish are best first additions. After your first addition of fish, it is good to let your aquarium get used to the new additions, as too much livestock added at once can cause a crash, especially in a new aquarium. Use this time to look up the best tank mates for your system. There are LOTS of them, so choose wisely! After your first addition, continue doing a water change every week as mentioned above. You should add no more than one fish every couple weeks/month depending on how big and messy the particular fish can be (i.e. a Foxface Rabbitfish or Snowflake Moray Eel will be a lot messier than a small pair of Clownfish), and test your water after to make sure your aquarium is handling the new additions well.

Day 21-Assuming your tank cycled quickly and by Day 14 you purchased your first fish, by this time you should change any chemical filtration, like carbon filter packets and GFO, to help keep your new ecosystem clean and algae free. Regular monthly changing of this media will be important to keep nutrient levels at their lowest, which many reef-keepers tend to strive for. Take some time in the next couple weeks to research your next tank mate and allow your store to have it ordered...OR, enjoy what you have for now and get the hang of regular maintenance for the tank if fish keeping is a brand new experience for you.

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