

# Keeping captive-bred fish has gotten easier

June 6 2017, by Linda Lombardi

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This June 2, 2017 photo shows a Clown fish in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)

Remember when keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts?  
Now, the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and expect to keep the fish alive and healthy.

Where the [fish](#) come from has also changed: Many are now bred for the trade instead of caught in the wild—a difference that tends to be healthier for the fish and the environment.

Dante Fenolio, vice president for conservation and research at San Antonio Zoo, in Texas, remembers what the business was like in the 1970s and early 1980s: "My dad owned a company that imported fresh water and [marine fish](#) from all over the world," he says. "I don't recall there being anything when I was a kid that was regularly captive-bred. Every now and again someone would say they got a clownfish to breed, but then they had problems with the young... It was nothing like it is now."

The most recent list of captive-bred [species](#) compiled by Tal Sweet for Coral Magazine totals 330. Twenty-seven species are judged as "commonly available" and 38 "moderately available"—plenty of choices with which the new hobbyist can stock a tank.

Sweet started compiling the list—a joint effort between the magazine and the Marine Life Aquarium Society of Michigan—in 2013, when the total was a little over 200 species. So progress has been rapid, and impressive, because figuring out how to breed these fish is not simple.



In this June 2, 2017 photo, saltwater tanks of fish for sale are shown at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)

"It's not like putting two animals of opposite sex together and just saying go do it," says Fenolio. Temperature and season are important, but that's just the start, and each species presents its own challenges. In the wild, critical details might include lunar cycle, changes in salinity, even other species' breeding. "A lot of species won't breed unless their prey species is breeding around them—they won't get going till their babies will have something to eat," he says.

Such efforts, however, have created a range of captive-bred options for the hobbyist, and experts suggest sticking to them.

For one thing, captive-bred fish are likely to start out healthier than wild fish: "They're not exposed to disease and pathogens, and not exposed to as much transportation stress," says Sweet.

They're also more likely to eat what you can buy to feed them. "Captive-bred fish have grown up eating pellets and frozen foods," he says.



This June 2, 2017 photo shows a seahorse in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and

healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)

Commonly available captive-bred species also tend to be fish that beginners can succeed with. "They can withstand a little learning curve," says Jeff Gibula, zoological operations manager at Newport Aquarium in Kentucky. He observes that big breeders are likely to put their efforts into what keeps customers coming back: "You want to sell the thing people can do well with."

Aside from your success as a fish-keeper, though, there are also bigger issues of conservation.

Wild aquarium fish are sometimes caught with methods that are bad both for the fish and the ecosystem it comes from. The fish may be stunned with dynamite or caught using cyanide. There's also the pressure often put on wild populations.

Gibula, who runs his own aquarium installation company, says some wholesalers offer sustainably caught [wild fish](#) that he is comfortable buying. He can see how they track the fish from their point of origin, and they guarantee how they've been caught and handled.



This June 2, 2017 photo shows Yellow Tang fish in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)

That may be an option that allays environmental concerns, but you won't know unless you ask.

"My favorite store, they label every fish where it came from—the name of the company or breeder," says Sweet. "Not every store does that, but if I go into a store and they can't tell me where their fish is from, I won't buy it."

Both captive-bred and sustainably collected fish are likely to be more expensive, but Sweet says you're getting value for the money: "In the long run, it's better to pay more for a fish that's going to last longer."



You're also doing the responsible thing. Fenolio notes that even for species that are currently doing well, the global phenomenon of coral reef bleaching is an issue.



This June 2, 2017 photo shows a Copperband Butterfly fish in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy.(Benny Snyder/AP Photo)

"Species could quickly become endangered because there aren't that many healthy reefs left," he says.

Still, as a conservationist, Fenolio doesn't discourage people from keeping marine fish—quite the contrary. "I do support the hobby wholeheartedly because it offers an opportunity for people to connect

with wildlife as our cities get bigger ... and as wildlife and wild places vanish," he says.

But do it responsibly: Don't just go into the store and point at what looks pretty. Do your research and know what questions to ask. Says Fenolio: "Impulse buys are absolutely the worst thing you can do with any pet."



This June 2, 2017 photo shows Stars and Stripes Puffer fish in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)





This June 2, 2017 photo shows a Scopas Tang in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)



This June 2, 2017 photo shows a Regal Blue Tang fish in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)



This June 2, 2017 photo shows Springer Damsel fish in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)



This June 2, 2017 photo shows a Gem Tang in a saltwater tank and available for sale at Dallas North Aquarium in Dallas, Texas. Not long ago keeping a saltwater aquarium was just for experts. Now the technology has advanced to the point where just about anyone can do it and actually expect to keep the fish alive and healthy. (Benny Snyder/AP Photo)

**More information:** Coral Magazine captive bred lists:  
[www.reef2rainforest.com/coral- ... st-project-homepage/](http://www.reef2rainforest.com/coral-st-project-homepage/)

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