

Tropical Freshwater Fish

How to care for American cichlids

American cichlids are from the family *Cichlidae* and are popular fish because of their personalities and bright colours. As their names suggest, they originate from Central and South America, but the majority of those in the aquarium trade are captive bred. They vary in both size and temperament, and some may be very aggressive. However, American cichlids are usually undemanding aquarium inhabitants and present relatively few challenges in keeping.



Water requirements

American cichlids are usually undemanding of water chemistry and their suggested parameters are stated below. The parameters are a general guide for this group of fish, so it is important to check with your OATA retailer for any species-specific requirements before purchasing.

Temperature:	between 22-27°C
pH:	6.5-8.0
Ammonia:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrite:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrate:	Not to exceed 20 mg per litre above normal tap water levels
General hardness:	Soft-medium (4-12°dH)
Carbonate hardness:	Soft-medium (3-10°dkH)

Biology

There are many different American cichlids in the trade, but some of the most popular are angelfish (*Pterophyllum scalare*), oscars (*Astronotus ocellatus*) and firemouths (*Thorichthys meeki*).

American cichlids vary in size from relatively smaller species such as firemouths (15cm) to much larger species such as oscars (40cm).

All American cichlids can live for several years in a well matured set up with good water quality.

Most American cichlids will do better either singly or in pairs. However, some species such as angelfish, should be kept in groups or a pair at minimum. Angelfish are social and those which are kept singly may become stressed.



Sexing American cichlids varies depending on species. There will be obvious differences between some species (colours, size, finnage), but some species may show no differences unless they are breeding.

Aquarium requirements

As a general rule, you should within reason, buy an aquarium as large as possible. It is recommended that an aquarium of at least 120 litres is used for a pair of the smaller species (less than 15cm), and at least a 300 litre aquarium for the larger or more aggressive species (over 15cm). Angelfish will also need an aquarium that is sufficiently tall when they are fully grown. For shoaling species, such as angelfish, allow 40 litres per adult fish when stocking an aquarium. The larger the aquarium, the more stable the environmental conditions such as temperature and water quality will be. Whatever the size, **a filter is always essential**.

The tank should also have fine aquarium gravel or sand as many species will dig or sift the substrate when feeding or breeding. Additionally, American cichlids may dig up or eat live plants and so the addition of plastic plants to provide cover is a suitable alternative. Other forms of cover are also recommended such as wood, branches, rockwork, plant pots or model caves. It is also important to provide American cichlids with plenty of open space to swim.

A heater is required to maintain a suitable temperature all year round. To minimise fluctuations in water temperature, the aquarium should not be situated near any draughts or heat sources. It should also be out of direct sunlight and away from loud noises, vibrations and sudden movements. Overhead tank lighting is recommended to maintain a correct day-night cycle.

Water testing kits are essential so that water can be checked on a regular basis (once a week) to ensure it does not slip below the water requirements stated above.

Introducing your fish

Before adding any fish, seek advice from your OATA retailer to make sure that your aquarium is an appropriate size for the American cichlid species you would like to keep. Check that the water quality in your aquarium is suitable i.e. levels of ammonia and nitrite are zero. Only increase the number of fish you have in your aquarium slowly as the population of beneficial bacteria established when maturing your aquarium filter need to increase every time more fish are added and feeding increases. Overstocking or stocking your aquarium too quickly can result in 'new tank syndrome'. This occurs when there are not enough nitrifying bacteria to cope with the increased waste from the fish, leading to unhealthy levels of ammonia and nitrite, which may cause fish to become ill and die.

Healthy fish have clear bright eyes, undamaged fins, intact scales, no ulcerations or bumps, appropriate swimming behaviour and steady breathing. Do not purchase a seemingly healthy fish if sickly fish are present in the tank with it. Signs of disease



can include clamped fins, flicking against gravel or décor and shimmying (shaking). Diseases can be easily carried by fish that do not show any clinical signs. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice as they will have in-depth knowledge and experience.

Your OATA retailer will usually sell your fish to you in a plastic bag. Try not to keep them in this for too long. Once purchased, take your new fish home as quickly as possible because fish are easily stressed by bright lights, extreme temperatures, noise and movement.

Once home, your fish will need to acclimatise to their new environment and a common method of doing this is known as the 'floating bag' method. Switch off the aquarium lights and take the bag containing your new fish out of its outer wrappings carefully, avoiding exposure to bright light. Float the bag in the water of your tank to ensure the temperature in the bag is the same as the aquarium water. After 10 minutes, slowly introduce small amounts of aquarium water into the bag containing the fish for up to 20 minutes. Once complete, carefully release the fish into the aquarium whilst introducing as little bag water into the aquarium as possible. After this, dispose of the bag and any excess water appropriately. Monitor your new fish carefully for the first week, paying particular attention to water quality. If in doubt, contact your OATA retailer for advice.

Maintenance

At least once every week, a partial water change of 25% is strongly recommended (a siphon device is useful to remove solid waste from the gravel). The water should be tested regularly (at least once per week) to ensure that ammonia and nitrites don't build up. Ensure that the replacement water is treated with tap water conditioner to remove any harmful chlorine or chloramine present before adding to the aquarium.

Filters should be checked for blockages. If the filter needs cleaning, do not run it under the tap because any chlorine or chloramine present may kill the beneficial bacterial population that has established in the media. Instead, it should be rinsed lightly in the tank water which is removed during a partial water change as this reduces the amount of bacteria which are lost.

Good husbandry is essential as American cichlids can be stressed by even the smallest amounts of ammonia and nitrite which may then cause them to develop various diseases. Test the water to monitor the ammonia, nitrite and nitrate levels, together with pH and water hardness every week, especially during initial set-up and after adding extra fish.

What to watch out for

All fish will have slight variations in their behaviour or appearance, but keeping an eye on any changes in the following will help to identify any potential problems before they become a real health issue:



- swimming behaviour – hanging at the surface, sitting on the bottom or erratic swimming
- colour – turning a darker or paler colour than normal
- temperament – changes in level of aggression or hiding more than normal
- breathing – gill covers moving at a slower or faster rate than normal
- appearance – development of white spots or fluffy growths, loss of fins or scales
- condition – increase or decrease in body weight and condition
- feeding – reduced intake or lack of interest in food

If you are concerned about the health of any of your livestock, then test your water quality and contact your OATA retailer for further guidance.

Feeding

Generally, American cichlids are omnivorous, but they will often prefer meaty foods. There are many specialised cichlid pellets and granules available which should be supplemented with frozen or freeze-dried items. Smaller species will appreciate items such as daphnia, brine shrimp and bloodworm, whereas larger species will prefer items such as cockles, lance fish or prawns.

American cichlids should only be fed what they can eat within a few minutes, once a day. They can eat large amounts of food in one sitting so take care not to overfeed. Overfeeding can lead to excess faeces or a build-up of uneaten food that breaks down releasing toxic waste into the water. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice on appropriate feeding levels.

Compatibility

Mixing American cichlids can be difficult. Some calmer species like angelfish and severums can be mixed in a robust community aquarium with larger shoaling species. However, the more aggressive species must be kept either alone or with equally aggressive cichlids. Consult your OATA retailer before purchasing any American cichlids to ensure your chosen species are compatible.

Breeding

American cichlids can breed in the home aquarium. They are all egg layers and will be seen cleaning a flat surface prior to breeding. Once the eggs are laid, the parents will protect their fry in a small school until they are free-swimming. Due to their aggressive nature when breeding, a dedicated set-up and specialist fry foods are required for best results.



Checklist

Before purchase make sure:

1. You have the appropriate equipment and position for the aquarium.
2. You have researched all the species in which you are interested and your final choices are all compatible.
3. You are familiar with how to transport and release your fish.
4. You are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance your aquarium will require.
5. You are prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life.

Shopping List

- ▶ Glass or acrylic aquarium
- ▶ Filter*
- ▶ Heater
- ▶ Lighting (required for live plants)*
- ▶ Gravel or sand
- ▶ Tap water conditioner/dechlorinator
- ▶ Water testing kits (ideally ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH and water hardness)
- ▶ Gravel cleaner/siphon cleaning device (recommended)
- ▶ Aquarium decorations and/or live plants
- ▶ Bucket for water changes

*may be included in branded aquarium sets but can be purchased separately.

Before purchase make sure:

- ▶ The aquarium is of a suitable size that ideally can accommodate the fish once they are fully grown
- ▶ Water parameters are as advised in this leaflet.
- ▶ Aquarium is cycled and ready to receive fish.

Always buy...

test kits and regularly check the water for ammonia, nitrite, nitrate and pH. This will allow you to make sure the water in your aquarium is not causing welfare problems for your American cichlids.

Maintain...

the water in the aquarium within the accepted parameters highlighted above. You

Establish a routine...

for testing the water in your aquarium. Record your results to enable you to identify fluctuations quickly. Also check the temperature of the water.

Always wash your hands...

making sure to rinse off all soap residues, before putting them into your aquarium, or use long sleeved rubber gloves. Wash your



may need to do regular water changes to achieve this.

hands again afterwards and certainly before eating, drinking or smoking.

Never siphon by mouth...

A fish tank can harbour bacteria which can be harmful if swallowed. Buy a specially designed aquarium gravel cleaner which can be started or primed without the need to place the siphon in your mouth

Five Welfare Needs Checklist:

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 states that all pet owners have a legal duty of care to their pets. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or is found not to be providing the five animal welfare needs, as listed below, can be prosecuted.

- ▶ A **suitable environment** e.g. appropriately sized tank (with water heater if tropical set up) within a suitable location in your home.
- ▶ A **suitable diet** which meets the needs of your chosen fish.
- ▶ **Behaviour** - Fish are able to exhibit their normal behaviour e.g. hiding places for timid fish, enough room for fish to swim freely.
- ▶ **Companionship** - Ensure you know whether your chosen fish need to be kept with, or apart from, other fish.
- ▶ **Health** - Protected from pain, injury, suffering & disease e.g. you are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance that your aquarium will need.

- ▶ **Water quality test kits are a necessity not an optional extra**
- ▶ **You must be prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life and provide an aquarium which can accommodate your fish when fully grown**



*Never release your aquarium animals or plants into the wild It is illegal and for most fish species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to our native countryside. Take care to properly dispose of any soiled substrate (e.g. sand or gravel) water or decorations so that non-native organisms do not enter natural watercourses.

Visit ornamentalfish.org to find a full range of how to guides and species-specific care sheets to help you look after your fish successfully.

