

Tropical Freshwater Fish

How to care for dwarf cichlids

Dwarf cichlids are popular due to their small size and bright colours. They are a diverse group of fish originating from Africa and South America but the majority of those in the aquarium trade are captive bred.

Although they are usually undemanding aquarium inhabitants, care has to be taken when mixing these fish with other species as they can be territorial, especially if breeding.



Water requirements

Dwarf cichlids are usually undemanding of water chemistry and their suggested parameters are shown 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:	6.0-8.0
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 species of dwarf cichlid in the trade but the most popular are rams, kribensis and those from the genus *Apistogramma*. Some African lake species, e.g. shell dweller cichlids, are sometimes referred to as dwarf cichlids. These have specific care requirements and are not suitable for community aquaria. For information on how to keep these species, please see our 'African Lake Cichlid' caresheet.

As their name suggests, these fish do not grow particularly big with the larger species not exceeding 10cm. Some of these fish are more demanding than others in terms of water quality and tank set up, but with the right care they can live several years in a well matured set up. For guidance on the best species for your aquarium, please ask your OATA retailer for advice. Some dwarf cichlids can be territorial, especially when breeding. As such, it is worth doing some research into compatibility with other species before making your choice. Dwarf cichlids are social and will do well in male, female pairs, or one male with multiple females. If you want to keep more than one pair, then ensure that the aquarium is large



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enough for each pair to establish their own territory. Sexing dwarf cichlids is relatively easy as there are usually obvious sex differences in colour, size or their fins between male and females.

Aquarium requirements

As a general rule, you should within reason, buy an aquarium as large as possible. If just a pair is being kept, it is recommended that they are kept in an aquarium of at least 60 litres. An aquarium of at least 80 litres will be needed to mix these species with other fish. 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 aquarium gravel or sand and ideally live plants present to provide cover, especially for the more shy species. Even well settled pairs will often chase each other so providing plenty of cover is essential. If live plants are not used, then the addition of plastic plants and suitable ornaments is recommended, such as plant pots, model caves, wood and leaf litter, which provide the fish with shelter. These fish usually form a territory surrounding an optimal spawning site, such as a piece of wood, stone or cave. For these fish to be comfortable, it is good to provide a choice of these sites in your aquarium.

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 quality 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 number of dwarf cichlids 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 or 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



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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 dwarf 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



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- ▶ 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

Dwarf cichlids are omnivorous and will take most food types. In the home aquarium, they should be fed with a good quality flake or granule. They will also benefit from being fed small items of live or frozen food such as daphnia, brine shrimp or tubifex.

Dwarf cichlids should only be fed what they can eat within a few minutes, once a day. Take care not to overfeed as this can lead to a build-up of uneaten food which breaks down releasing toxic waste into the water. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice on appropriate feeding levels.

Compatibility

Dwarf cichlids can be kept in community aquariums, but it is important to ensure all other tankmates have enough space should they start breeding. They are best kept with shoals of 'dither fish' – which give the cichlids a sense of security and are quick enough to swim away if your cichlids become territorial. Some species, such as those in *Apistogramma*, can be quite shy and will not do well in aquariums with very active or boisterous tankmates. If you intend to breed these fish, it is worth avoiding tank mates that might disturb spawning sites or predate on the fry.

Breeding

These fish will readily breed in an aquarium with the right conditions and, like their more aggressive relatives, they will also guard and protect the fry. Eggs are normally deposited inside a cave or on an open surface. Parental care will vary between species, with differing levels of care provided by the male and female. For some species, the female will often protect the eggs and the male protects the territory outside of the breeding area. In others, males and females will be equally involved in protecting the eggs and fry. After laying, eggs will typically hatch within 3-4 days and are free swimming within another couple of days. Adult fish make good parents and will swim with their offspring ensuring they do not stray too far from the school. Parents will retrieve "run away" offspring with their mouths, returning



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them to the group. For best results, a dedicated set-up and specialist fry foods are required.

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 dwarf 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



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may need to do regular water changes to achieve this.

use long sleeved rubber gloves. Wash your 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) 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.



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