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Things To Consider Before Buying A Coral

Article & Images By Richard Ross

Stocking your tank is a big part of what this hobby is about. This article presents some considerations to keep in mind before bringing a coral home – especially if you have a new system or are new to the hobby. With just a little forethought, the buying experience can be fun, successful, and can support the future of the hobby.

1

Is your tank ready?

It seems like a rudimentary question, but far too many reefers purchase delicate animals before their tanks are stable. We all understand the desire to fill up our tanks quickly, but the potential loss of life and money are only two of many good reasons to be patient. Deciding that your tank is ready isn't quite as straightforward as we would like, as different tanks mature at different rates. When you decide that your tank is ready for its first few corals, proceed slowly by adding only one hardy coral and watch it for a couple of weeks before deciding to add anything else. Since stability is key to maintaining new coral in captive systems, people with well established tanks should consider the timing of any large scale maintenance activities that can affect a system's stability, such as large water changes, replacing calcium or phosphate reactor media, or even replacing bulbs. These system changes should be completed before adding new corals whenever possible.

2

Do you really want it and will it get along with its new tankmates?

Avoid impulse buys, and know that a little bit of research before a purchase can save you a lot of headaches after the fact. It's easy to buy a galaxia coral at the LFS because it's pretty, but if you don't know about the long stinging sweeper tentacles that can damage or kill other coral, you may be in for a heap of trouble once you get it home. Learning about the coral before you take it home will also help you prepare an appropriate site in your tank that will provide it with the flow, food, light and space it requires.



The white, freshly exposed skeleton on this LPS could indicate a health problem.

3

Is it wild collected?

With the amount of captive grown coral available through frag swaps, coral farmers' markets and conscientious vendors, there are alternatives to obtaining only wild collected corals. One basic issue with wild collected corals is acclimation to captive conditions – it can take a wild coral a year or more to adapt to artificial light, flow and nutrition. Sometimes the wild coral doesn't even survive long enough to adapt. Another issue is collection impact - wild coral collection has an impact on the wild reef itself, and even though other factors such as dredging and pollution often impact the reef more than coral collection for the hobby, collection still has impact. Some collectors are responsible and do all they can to harvest corals without damaging the reef or over harvesting. However, there are some who don't pay attention to such things. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to determine if a certain coral was harvested in a sustainable fashion or not. Another less obvious consideration regarding wild collected corals is the amount of resources needed to get them from the reef to the hobbyist – the list includes Styrofoam shipping boxes, plastic bags, and jet fuel amongst others.

4

Is it captive grown?

In my opinion, everyone should be doing their best to obtain captive grown corals. Let's consider "captive grown" coral to be a coral grown in an aquarium or propagation facility from a fragment of either a wild collected coral or from another captive grown colony. Either way, a captive grown coral is not from a wild reef, and obtaining corals that are propagated in other aquaria is one of the best ways to lessen the pressure of coral collection on wild reefs. Equally as important, a captive grown coral has already been acclimated to captive conditions in regards to light, synthetic saltwater and flow. This increases the coral's chance of successful acclimation and long-term survival in your system.

5

Is it aquacultured/ maricultured?

Generally, aquaculture refers to growing animals in controlled environments, while mariculture refers to growing animals in the ocean itself. I am putting the two concepts in one section because, sadly, common usage in the hobby has blended them together making it difficult to know the reality of a particular coral's origin. If you can confirm that a vendor is aquaculturing coral, then you can consider those corals to be captive grown. However, many 'aquacultured' corals for sale in the hobby are really maricultured in the ocean from fragments of wild colonies, and are subject to all the same issues of acclimation to captive conditions as wild collected corals. Maricultured corals can be a great way to support sustainable use of wild reefs and the local communities that surround them.

6

Is the vendor reputable?

If you are buying coral online, buy from a vendor that has a guarantee and that offers a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) selection. A picture of the actual coral will allow you to make a determination of its health and a guarantee will provide you some recourse if something goes wrong. Also, take some time to research feedback from online communities or your local reef club about the particular vendor – knowing that a vendor consistently receives good or bad feedback can save you time, money and heartache. If you are shopping locally, support local fish stores that have knowledgeable staff, clean systems, quarantine tanks and healthy animals. Shop for quality instead of price. Although we all want to save money, saving money on a coral that dies isn't really a good deal in the long run. Please support a high standard of animal care with your purchasing power.

7

Is it healthy?

If you are buying from a local fish store, you have the luxury of examining a coral before purchase. Since there are many different kinds of coral, you will be relying on your research to know whether that particular coral is healthy. There are some generalities to keep in mind. Look for coral with good color, polyp extension, and/or tissue inflation. Most importantly, look for coral without tissue recession or



Old tissue recession, such as on this Blastomussa, is less of a concern.

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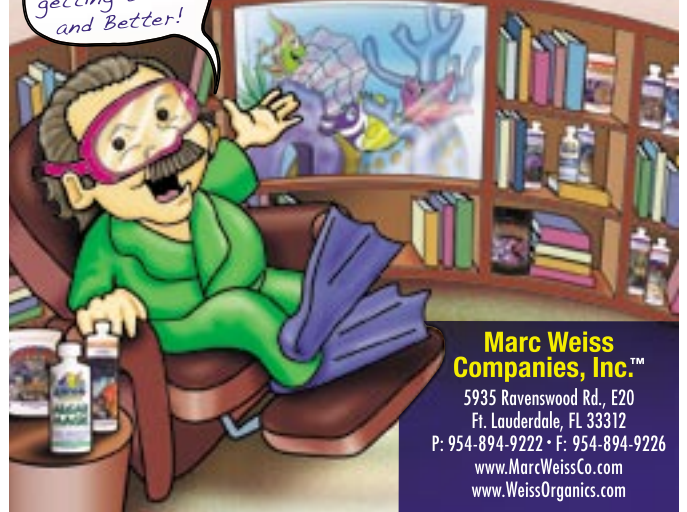


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extremely faded colors. It is sometimes tempting to buy a coral that isn't looking so good to try and 'save' it, but this often ends with a dead coral in your tank, your well intentioned purchase wasted, and a vendor that thinks it's ok to stock unhealthy coral. Sure, some coral can be saved, but a little patience will often allow you to find a healthy specimen that will thrive in your tank right away.

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Are you prepared to deal with potential pests?

The list of possible coral pests in aquaria is daunting: acro-eating flatworms, montipora eating nudibranchs, zoanthid eating nudibranchs, zoanthid eating sea spiders, red planaria, red bugs, clam-killing snails and more. These pests are an issue both in wild collected corals and captive grown specimens, so be ready to deal with them regardless of where your new coral was grown. Whole tank treatments can be stressful at best, and ineffective or deadly at worst, so it is of great benefit to avoid introducing pests into your show tank in the first place. At bare minimum, you will want to develop a dipping regimen for newly acquired corals. In the long run you will be better off setting up a quarantine tank to hold newly acquired corals for dipping, treatment and observation. A quarantine tank can be simple and inexpensive, and has become a must for many reef hobbyists. The details of dipping regimens and quarantine tanks are outside the scope of this article, so please check online and with your local reef club for up to date and detailed information.