

Checklist

Before purchase make sure that:

- 1 You have the appropriate equipment and position for the aquarium.
- 2 You have researched all the species you are interested in 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.

Equipment

- 1 Glass or plastic aquarium
- 2 Gravel cleaner
- 3 Water testing kit
- 4 Tap water conditioner
- 5 Gravel
- 6 Filter
- 7 Food
- 8 Heater & thermometer

Before purchase make sure:

- 1 Water parameters meet the requirements because it is essential these fish are kept in hard alkaline water
- 2 The aquarium is large enough to house at least four of these fish



Never release your aquarium animals or plants into the wild

Never release an animal or plant bought for a home aquarium into the wild. It is illegal and for most fish species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death because they are not native to this country. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to the environment.

Important things to remember

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 fish.

Establish a routine...

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

Maintain...

the water in the aquarium within the accepted parameters highlighted in this leaflet. You may need to do regular water changes to achieve this.

Always wash your hands...

making sure to rinse off all soap residues, before putting them into your aquarium. 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 without the need to place the siphon in your mouth.



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If in doubt contact your OATA retail member for further information



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The voice of the ornamental fish industry

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How to care for...



African Malawi Cichlids

30 Tropical freshwater fish



Introduction

Malawi cichlids are very colourful, diverse and aggressive fish. It is thought they are some of the most colourful tropical fish that can be kept. In the wild they are found in Lake Malawi, Africa. This is the third largest lake in Africa, eight largest in the world and thought to hold more fish species than any other lake on the planet.

Water requirements

The Malawi cichlids are a specialised group of fish and this is reflected in the water parameters. The following is preferred but they can be acclimatised to other water over time:

Temperature: 23 to 28°C

pH: 8.0 to 8.6

Ammonia: 0mg/l (0.02mg/l may be tolerated for short periods)

Nitrite: 0mg/l (0.2mg/l may be tolerated for short periods)

Hardness: Slightly hard to hard (9 to 19°dH)

Biology

There are 13 genera into which the Malawi cichlids can be placed. All of these fish are somewhat aggressive although this varies from species to species.

The size range of this group is reasonably large, however depending upon the aquarium into which they are to be housed, there is generally a Malawi which would be appropriate. They can grow to between 5 to 20cm.

Many of these fish show colour differences between the sexes. The males are often brightly coloured and females slightly duller. In some species, egg spots can be found on the anal fin of the males. Juveniles do not always show differences, sometimes you need to wait until the fish are adult before accurate sexing can occur.

This group of fish are mouth brooders, the female or male (species dependant) will carry the fry in his/her mouth until they are large enough to feed.

In good water quality and without ailments, these fish can thrive for many years in an aquarium.

Aquarium requirements

This group of fish require relatively large tanks, this helps to reduce aggression and should provide space for territories to be established. This might best be provided by a tank of minimum size of 100 litres. If a smaller tank is purchased it may need to be upgraded in the future.

These fish often dig into the substrate with their mouths, therefore a smooth gravel (not horticultural gravel) or sand base should be used to avoid injury. In order to maintain the alkalinity of the water, coral gravel can be placed into the filter.

Good filtration is a must in cichlid tanks. These fish are relatively dirty compared to other tropical species. The aquarium will also require lighting. The fish's colouration shows up best under white light. A heater, thermometer and secure lid are also required.

Rocks and caves provide territories, the use of limestone and coral rock may help to maintain the hard alkaline water which is preferred, even in soft water areas.

The tank should be large enough to house each species to be kept in a ratio of 1:2/3 (male:female). This prevents the males from harassing a single female. If juveniles are bought it may be difficult to sex the fish. Ask your OATA retailer for advice.

Maintenance

At least once every two weeks a partial water change of 25 to 30% is strongly recommended (a siphon device is useful to remove waste from the gravel). The water should be tested regularly to ensure that pollutants such as ammonia and nitrites do not build up. Ensure you either allow the replacement water to stand or aerate it to remove any chlorine present. Ideally treat all replacement water with tap water conditioner before adding to the aquarium.

Filters should be checked for clogging and blockages. If the filter needs cleaning then do not run it under the tap as any chlorine present may kill the beneficial bacterial population that has established in the media. Instead, it can be rinsed 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 these fish can be stressed by even the smallest amounts of ammonia and nitrite. Test the water to monitor the ammonia, nitrite and nitrate levels every week, especially during initial set-up and after adding extra fish.

Feeding

These fish are omnivores in the wild and will feed insatiably. They should be fed two to three times a day in an aquarium. They will be seen actively picking up rock to eat the algae. Remove any uneaten food to reduce the build-up of waste.

For the home aquarium there are specialised cichlid pellets available. These act as a good staple diet, although this can also be supplemented with fresh vegetables and algae tablets.

Potential problems

A water quality problem will affect fish behaviour and can be shown by clamped fins, reduced feeding, erratic swimming and gasping at the surface. Immediately test the water if any of these symptoms are shown. If in doubt ask your OATA retailer for advice.

Compatibility

Malawi cichlids should not be added to a community set-up due to their aggressive nature. They need to be kept in cichlid-only tanks. Other possible tank mates could include catfish of the *Synodontis* catfish family. These catfish originate from similar waters as Malawi cichlids and will adapt well to the same water conditions. While originating from a different continent, common plecs and bristlenoses may also be compatible in a Malawi cichlid tank.

When stocking your cichlid aquarium try to introduce a small group of fish. This can help prevent one or two individuals becoming territorial over the entire tank. If you do want to add more at a later date, try rearranging the décor (rock and caves) soon after the new fish are added. This means that the fish have to concentrate in establishing new territories and reduces fighting.

Breeding

Some Malawi Cichlids can be bred in an aquarium. They are mouth brooders which is different to many other tropical species, making breeding a rewarding challenge. Malawis will successfully breed in a tank with other fish and if there are plenty of hiding places, some of the fry may survive.

A male will usually exhibit bright colours and show digging behaviour before spawning occurs. The female will hold the fertilised eggs in her mouth for between 21 to 40 days. The fry, when released, are larger than most other fry and can feed readily.