

Grist From The Mill



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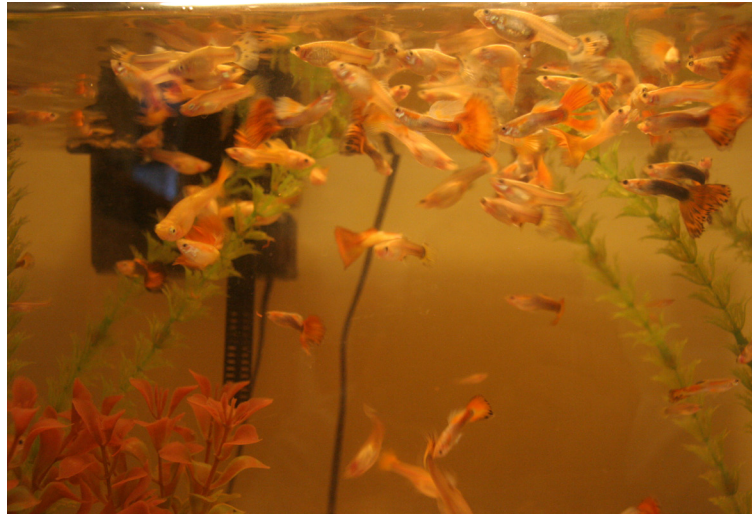
Yeah, well... They're only fish

Devoting resources – both time and technology – to fish may seem a little eccentric. Countless volumes have no doubt been written about fish but those are usually reserved for how to catch them and then, in much greater volume – and interest, how to prepare them and is a red wine really okay with fish.

There are, of course, many treatises on the keeping of fish as pets and many of them go into much detail about how to keep fish in a tank. How to keep them clean, healthy and vibrant. What to feed them, what kinds of fish live well together etc. We never read any of them. We didn't have to. From before Luca was born – almost 8 years ago until about 3 days ago we have had a prolific and vibrant community of Guppies in a small, 10-gallon tank. They first came to us by way of Emilio's friend Jonathan who gave us 4 fish.

Anyone who has ever kept fish knows that Guppies can be considered the rabbits of the fish world. You never have very few for very long. And sure enough, up to the maximum capacity of such a small tank, the 4 Guppies multiplied until they stabilized at about 30 or 40 individuals.

Now, given the very small genetic pool the 4 came from, after 2 or 3 generations, many of the fry were a little strange. Humped backs, odd shapes and I think we even had one with no eyes – but I'm not sure. A few months after we got the fish, I supplemented their in-bred ranks with some newcomers from the pet store. This was a resounding success. We had very fancy Guppies. Bright orange tails, black bodies, polka dotted fins. Quite pretty.



For the past eight years we have seeded other tanks with our brood. Friends have taken (and sometimes returned) many fish from our thriving community. Even Jonathon, who started the whole thing, went through a few years with no fish and then came to get a few "starters" once he got a tank again. We always dispensed the same advice: "Don't do too much! Let Mother Nature do the work." What we meant by that is change a little of the water regularly. Don't bother with fancy foods and add-ons and chemicals. Give the babies somewhere to hide and the tank will be fine. In fact, it sometimes appeared that the more we neglected the tank, the healthier the population was.

A couple of weeks ago Emilio and I thought that the number of fish in our tank seemed a little less than usual so I thought again that we may be facing another genetic issue. After all, the same fish had been breeding for countless generations for almost 7 years – so we decided to get some "new blood" from the local store. Emilio chose 4 new males and they were soon added to the ranks.

Things did not get better. About a week ago Luca noticed that there were 6 or 7 dead fish in the tank. We fished them out but by the time we got home that evening there were another 10 or so dead. Something was obviously wrong.

I scrutinized the tank for anything strange. Over the years, with 2 kids in the house it's amazing what has found its way into the tank. Cars, die-cast aeroplanes, a harmonica, a train and enough Lego to build a castle. At first I didn't see anything unusual but then I saw 2 pennies at the bottom of the tank. Pennies are made (at least these 2 were) of copper – and copper is toxic to fish. By now we were down to about 8 surviving fish so I took them out and put them in a separate bowl. Unfortunately it didn't help. By the end of the evening, the last of the fish was dead.

We debated long and hard if it was the new fish carrying a disease or the copper or some other invisible enemy that rendered our population extinct. All we know is that all our fish had died.

It's not so much that the fish are gone; it is more about what has happened in our lives in the time that we had that same set of live-breeders.

We lost a dog and a cat, 2 or 3 bunnies – one of them with her 4 or 5 newborns that we missed and a guinea pig. We got Kiko and Peanut. We have gone through 4 cars and taken countless trips. School started and careers launched. Basically life happened and all the while the fish were there.

The fish were a way of teaching the boys responsibility and caring. Emilio had recently taken a real interest in them as a social community and was making very keen observations on their behaviour. Watching the new babies grow up and wondering about their colouring was a constant source of fascination for me and Mascha.

The tank lies empty and mostly dried out on the deck right now. The flies have laid their eggs in the bodies of the few I didn't fish out. It's smelling like an old fish tanks and we have to decide what to do. In a way the fish were always a concern when we were away, having to arrange for someone to come and feed them. Now we don't have to think about it. On the other hand, I have personally sat in front of that tank and watched them for hours. God knows the boys needed constant reminding to feed the fish or fill up the tank so perhaps this is a blessing in disguise.

On the other hand maybe I'll pass by the pet store this weekend and see what they have.....

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