



Inspirational displays, like this reef tank at AquaTouch in Phoenix, get customers excited about the potential for their own tanks.

Making Great Reef Aquascapes

Inspire your marine customers to create beautiful, fish-friendly aquascapes—and buy more products—with these four tips. By Jennifer Pinkley

Do some of your customers think that marine aquascaping simply means sticking a couple pieces of coral in their aquarium? Marine aquascaping is a rewarding hobby, but some people seem to have a hard time setting up aquascapes that benefit their fish and look good, too. With a little help from you, though, they'll have more fun with the hobby and buy more of your products, too.

Here are four tips for getting your customers to move beyond bare-bones aquascaping.

1. Start Off Simple

To get your customers really interested in fabulous marine aquascaping, don't start off by trying to sell them your best products. Focusing too early on complex and expensive items may overwhelm customers and make them think serious aquascaping is something they can never master. You certainly don't want that!

Sometimes just helping your customers to delve into caring for fish and a new setup is half the battle. That will help develop their interest in the hobby and, one hopes, inspire them to upgrade in the future or try more elaborate setups.

First, make a personal connection. "Try to get on first-name basis right away. Get to know them," said Joe Martin, store manager at AquaTouch (Phoenix).

Once you establish that personal connection, figure out their experience level and what they hope to get out of the hobby. Then direct them toward options that are realistic for their experience level. If you help your customers learn the basics of aquascaping, they will feel more confident jumping into the hobby.

Larry French, owner of Larry's Tropicals & Pet Supplies (St. Marys, Ga.), encourages his customers to start with less expensive and easy-to-care-for items, then build up experience to care for the more expensive

ones. "You can buy many things that you can put in your tank for a very reasonable price," said French. "You can also spend as much as \$100 for a piece of live coral, but customers should only do that after they become fairly experienced."

French suggests anemones as good starter animals.

Martin also steers new aquascapers toward easier-to-care-for items. He recommends starting them off with *Xenia* and green star polyps—animals that are easy to keep but still have great color. "We always try to keep things interesting, but not unobtainable for the novice or someone coming into the hobby," he said.

Of course, you want to make sure you sell products that will give your customers great results and establish a great visual layout. The higher-quality products you offer, the more attractive the results, said David Burr of Vivid Aquarium (Canoga Park, Calif.). "Using nice-quality rock is important to give you better aquascaping. Using Fiji rock doesn't give you as good of a rockscape as using something like Indonesian rock that has more nooks and crannies."

But be sure not to sell the customer too much rock or substrate. Martin says many stores tend to oversell these products, resulting in a tank that either looks overcrowded or is actually underpopulated. With too much rock or too much sand, the tank will not be biologically functional, plus it just won't look appealing.

2. Provide Plenty of Education

Another way to encourage creative aquascaping is to provide a good selection of educational materials in your store. Sell books and magazines, and consider providing free handouts to get customers started and inspired.

"If we do anything before the sale, we turn customers on to books and literature," said Martin.

His store also provides free printouts on topics of interest to hobbyists, like protein skimming basics and different lighting requirement for tanks. Providing information that customers can take home helps people who learn visually. Printed information also will help reinforce what you say on the sales floor.

French, too, provides his customers with plenty of accurate information. "Many of my customers read something on the Internet and think it's gospel, and that's not necessarily true," he said. "We carry books and magazines, and we have little brochures that we give out that are freebies."

Be sure to educate customers not just about the aesthetic benefits of aquascaping, but also the benefits to fish. Burr emphasizes the importance of explaining how having sufficient rockwork helps fish stay healthy. "Open rockwork gives fish more hiding places and helps establish separate territories for fish, so you could keep more fish in the aquarium," he said.

Also consider posting plenty of information on your website that customers can read before they even visit your store. By providing all of the basic information customers need to get started with aquascaping—plus information they can use as they gain experience—you'll set yourself apart as the local or regional expert. Customers will gain confidence in your knowledge and expertise even before their first visit.

Martin suggests providing inspirational photos of actual coral reefs as well as technical information. "One of my colleagues does a lot of research, plus he travels a lot and brings back underwater photos that are inspirational not only to us, but to our customers, too," he said.

Martin's store also uses beautiful pictures of natural aquascapes as screensavers on all of the store computers. Customers can then look at pictures of real coral reefs to get ideas for setting up their own aquariums.

3. Inspire With Beautiful Displays

One of the best ways to get customers excited about the possibilities for their own tanks is to show them plenty of inspirational display tanks in your store. AquaTouch features a wide variety of aquariums, each with an individual theme, said Martin. "Customers can then get ideas, and often say, 'Oh wow, I want to do this rock scheme,'" he said.

French says many of his customers get inspiration from public aquariums. "They'll come in and I'll show them some of the items they can get that are similar," he said.

When you have a variety of beautifully aquascaped tanks in your store, your customers are more likely to see something



This Indonesian biotope is one of many themed display tanks featured at AquaTouch (Phoenix). "If you have a variety of beautifully aquascaped tanks in your store, it's more likely your customers will see something they find inspiring, and want to give it a try," said store manager Joe Martin.

they find inspiring, and want to give it a try. "That helps them think, 'Yeah, I could do that!' We try to encourage them," said Martin.

Martin even makes sure stock tanks include interesting rocks to enhance their appeal. His staff also makes sure that glass on all aquariums is clean.

"People can relate to aesthetically good-looking tanks," said Martin. "That helps sales, helps cleanliness, and helps the reputation of the store just by having a good presentation."

When you have a variety of interesting tanks with different layouts and animals, customers can get a better idea of the features they like the best. "If they point at a tank and say, 'I like this,' then you ask them, 'What do you like about that tank? Is it the rock, the layout, the plants?'" Martin said.

Once you have a full understanding of what your customers find appealing, you can more effectively guide them toward a real aquascaping vision and recommend products that will help them achieve their vision.

4. Get Hands-on

For customers new to aquascaping, or customers having a hard time coming up with a vision, help them come up with

ideas that will work for them. Try setting aside an area in your store where customers can experiment with rock, wood and other accessories to help them get more of a feel for how they could set up their own aquascape.

"We have layout rock and layout wood in bins. If a customer's willing to spend some time with me, we can do a little layout right in front of them and show them different techniques or help them get ideas," said Martin.

Also be sure to explain, and possibly demonstrate, that you can mount rocks and corals with putty, epoxy and glue. "You can mount corals in a lot more places than you can just stack them," said Burr. "Mounting corals properly is a real big part of aquascaping."

When customers understand the different techniques they can use to create interesting layouts, they'll see more possibilities for their own tanks.

If you can help customers get started with a good mix of interesting rock, animals and fish, you can hook them on the hobby and ensure they'll come back to your store for more. ■

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