

LEAF TREES, SOFTWATER SOLUTION?

By Chase Klinesteker SWAM, Jan-Feb 2016



Oak Leaf "Tree"

SOFTWATER FISHES

Many aquarists have difficulty keeping, breeding, and raising some species of fishes, especially if they require a soft blackwater environment. This can include some tetras, rasboras, discus, barbs, anabantoids, dwarf cichlids, and killiefish. Leaves are a natural in the underwater world, and are present in most all waters. Fallen leaves and woody branches in lakes and streams begin to break down, releasing tannins and acids that discolor and soften the water. In high concentrations and heavy forested terrain, soft acid blackwater will exist along with many of the above kinds of fishes. Duplicating these water conditions, especially for more sensitive species, can often be necessary.

TREATING WATER

There are many ways that aquarists can attempt to condition their water in this way. The ideal way would be to use rain or RO water to keep and breed these fishes, but that is not practical for many. Throwing peat moss or leaf litter straight into the aquarium makes for a messy tank that is difficult to maintain and locate/catch the fish out of. A peat moss filter is cleaner, but can result in unstable water conditions. "Blackwater Tonic" can be added for tinting the water and adding some tannins, but cost and removal at the next water change are disadvantages. The tinting of the water by tannins is helpful, as blackwater fishes are accustomed to a low-light environment. Adding chemicals to acidify the water is risky and could even kill the fish.

SIMPLE WAY

The questions remained for me: "Is there a simple way to add tannins and soften my tankwater without being messy? Can I use readily available materials and still do my regular water changes?" Then it occurred to me: Why not use leaves, the natural solution, bundled in a group that can be easily added or removed? Leaves are overly available, although collecting them for aquarium use will not make a dent in fall cleanup! I like to use oak leaves because they are quite tough and will soften and acidify the water over time better than most. Collecting whole, fresh, dry oak leaves in the fall will insure a plentiful supply for the future. Hold a dozen or more leaves by the stems and secure them together by wrapping the base with stainless steel (fishing) wire, rubber band, or yarn. Then attach a weight, and there you have it---a leaf tree! These leaf trees can be added to or removed from an aquarium according to need. They can easily be removed, discarded, and replaced when they start falling apart. Longevity may depend on how much microorganism films are allowed to form on their surface. Many species of fishes will pick away at the microfilm, gaining nourishment and keeping them clean. Plecos and whiptails especially love to clean the leaf surfaces. These microfilms also can supply nourishment and hiding to tiny fry too small to ingest baby brine shrimp.

I recommend that you try tree leaves for a "leaf tree". Both you and your fish could benefit!