Why I DIY or There Are Many Ways To Save A Buck

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Whenever I walk through a fish store, I marvel at the variety that is available to us as aquatic hobbyists. And I'm not talking about livestock alone, but also plants, food and equipment. This variety is part of what makes this hobby so much fun. We are constantly on the lookout for new (and presumably better) ways of doing things. Whether it be a better mix of foods, a better combination of lights, or a set-up that more closely mimics nature, a good aquarist is always ready to consider something new that may enhance the health of our aquarium. However, often these advances are presented by local fish stores and manufacturing companies as something that we need and that only they can provide.

A while back I decided to place my fish tank in a different position. Rather than have the wide side of the aquarium face the wall, I placed it "end-in". Positioned behind a couch, it became viewable from three sides and more of a focal point in my home. However, this new position dictated that I wouldn't be able to use the standard access ports that came built into the canopy. I looked around and wasn't able to find a new canopy that was constructed to conform to my particular desired layout. I wanted to run all cables, tubing and wiring down the side of the aquarium facing the wall so as not to hinder viewing. So, not finding what I wanted, I built my own. This was my initiation into the world of "Doing It Yourself" or DIY.

Since then, I've read a lot of articles and seen some presentations where people construct accessories so that the hobby fits them rather than being constrained by trying to fit their desires into items that are offered by aquarium suppliers. I would encourage you to visit Klaus Steinhaus' website (www.buntbarsch.ca) and read about how he built his fish room to his specifications. And to take this further, enter the key words "aquarium" and "DIY" in any search engine to discover a vast selection of DIY projects.

However, "Doing It Yourself" shouldn't be only about constructing items. While I've built stands and canopies, and know of others who have built actual aquariums, pumps, CO^2 reactors and numerous other accessories, (and it is true that a cost savings can be realized from almost every one of these projects), we must also be aware that many of the "aquarium specific" items we see for sale are not truly limited to the aquatic hobby, and alternative items, if not identical items, can be found from other sources.

Some time ago, I decided to upgrade my tank from a 30 gallon to a 75 gallon aquarium. I prefer to have my tank be the focal point of my aquarium display, and therefore prefer to hide as many of the "distractions" as possible. You can hide items inside the tank (such as CO^2 outlets, air stones, heaters, and filter intakes and outputs) by strategically positioning tank decorations, but it is often much more difficult to camouflage the associated wires on the outside of the tank. By creatively planning your tank layout before you start construction on any "Do It Yourself" projects, you can find numerous unique and cost effective ways to lay out your tank and the required accessories in such a way that they are aesthetically pleasing, and cost-effective to construct.

As mentioned, one of the big advantages of "Doing It Yourself" is being able to customize the aquarium equipment (and the aquarium itself should you have the knowledge and skills necessary to correctly assemble the glass), but another (and surprising once you add it up) advantage is the cost savings you can realize by shopping around and gathering items from other locations.

I am avidly involved in growing aquatic plants. Unless you are so involved, you usually don't realize what a cost actually lighting the tank can be. First is the obvious cost of electricity running more lights, but the one item most often overlooked is the cost of the light bulbs themselves. In my latest set-up I have six 32 watt 48" T-8 bulbs running under a custom constructed canopy. All wiring was custom fit for my specific applications, and I saved about $200.00 by doing it myself. But in addition to this, you can save money in how you acquire the bulbs. Home building centres in our area carry fluorescent bulbs from major lighting manufacturers. It can be difficult to get specific lighting information on these bulbs, but research on the internet indicates that they are very similar to the specialized bulbs carried in fish stores. Whereas a bulb as described above can run upwards of $40.00 in an aquarium store, a similar bulb can be had for under $10.00 from one of the building stores.

Another thing I have found use for in my aquarium is slate, both as decorations and to hold down driftwood. A one pound piece of slate can be acquired from a local fish store starting at $1.99 per pound. If you go to a local gardening centre or rock supplier, the same piece can be had for as little as $0.39. Therefore a five pound piece of rock will cost you $10.00 from one source, and $1.95 at the other. Once you realize how much some of the "aquarium specific" products offered for sale are identical to items that can be found else where for a better price, you will undoubtedly be able to realize some savings.

Take the time to truly understand your needs as an aquarist, and once you have that understanding, think if there are alternatives to obtaining items you need or if you can indeed build them yourself.