



One Fish, Two Fish...

Home aquariums add architectural interest and a healthy dose of stress relief.

WATCHING FISH SWIM AROUND AN AQUARIUM IS RELAXING—IN FACT, IT'S ACTUALLY been shown to lower blood pressure. But there's one small problem: in the study that proved that point, the subjects were looking at someone else's fish tank. Their meditative mood wasn't disturbed by worrying about whether it was time to do a water change or wipe algae off the glass.

Fortunately, though, there is a way to get that completely calming effect in your own home: with a company that will design and set up a custom-made aquarium and maintain it for you, too. All you have to do is sit back and enjoy.

What's more, a professionally installed aquarium, along with its therapeutic value, can be a spectacular design feature. That's not something you can usually say about the effect that our pets have on our living spaces.

"This isn't your kid's aquarium," says Ed Warburton of Wet Pets, Inc. "There's no smell and it's not noisy. The filtration equipment is hidden, and you'll see just a few water outlets. You won't see wires and tubing."

Above: Freestanding aquariums are a popular choice for many homeowners. They can be installed without interfering with existing walls or other architectural elements.



BY LINDA LOMBARDI

Upfront Planning

With professional equipment and maintenance, you can have an aquarium that's large enough to be a central design element, not just a little tank tucked away in a corner. "If you want the tank to be a feature of the house, four feet is the minimum in length, and up to eight or ten feet," says Warburton. With custom construction, the width and height can be determined by the space that's available, and with aquariums made of acrylic rather than glass, even curved shapes like cylinders are possible.

A custom aquarium can be added to an existing space, but if you're planning a renovation or addition, it's the perfect time to consider this possibility. The tank itself will be installed last, but it's best to include it in the plans from the beginning. Your architect is likely not to have extensive experience with aquariums, says Warburton, so the earlier you discuss the details, the better.

Watch and Learn

While other pets have to fit into our human way of life, an aquarium is a chance to bring a new ecosystem into our homes. It's not just stress-reducing, it's also educational: Your family can observe and learn about the behavior of wild creatures in the comfort of your own living room.

Exotic saltwater fish are the trend in custom aquariums, partly because they tend to look the most dramatic. Warburton explains that because saltwater reefs are ecosystems that remain stable for millennia, fish evolve to fit many extremely specialized niches. Thus, the fish differ in size, shape, and color, as well as behavior, all of which make the fish seem to have more individual personalities.

Of course, reproducing such a delicately balanced ecosystem means that saltwater fish are trickier to care for. But when you've got professionals maintaining the aquarium for you, that isn't an issue. If your fish look out of sorts or the water needs extra attention, all you have to do is make a phone call.

As for cost, Warburton says that the average range for a custom designed and installed aquarium is about \$2,000 to \$5,000, with most being under \$5,000. For that amount, he says, "you can get almost anything you want." Maintenance fees start at around \$75 a month.

"In the grand scheme of building or renovating a house, it's a minor expense," he says, especially considering the impact you get for your money. Warburton observes that you could easily spend the same on a couch, and he notes, "Nobody remembers your couch. Everyone remembers your aquarium."

Resource

Wet Pets, Inc., Ed Warburton, 2601 Garfield Avenue, Silver Spring, Maryland, 301-565-3474, wetpetsinc.com



Photographs courtesy of Wet Pets, Inc.

Above: Three 150-gallon aquariums stand proudly behind the bar of this Great Falls home, adding a colorful natural display to the room.

Below: Interior designer Barry Dixon planned the foyer of this Bethesda home around the residents' desire for a 105-gallon aquarium.





Photography by Patricia Mathes Lake

Bringing Home the Ecosystem

THE PRESCHOOLERS WEREN'T THE ONLY ONES that were fascinated by the fish on the tour of Tropical Fish World in Gaithersburg.

"I got kind of hooked myself," said Celeste Moelleur of Bethesda, who accompanied her daughter's field trip.

So Moelleur started with a typical small aquarium setup. But then her growing interest in fish and a plan to add an extra bedroom came together and took an unexpected turn.

"We started by saying we wanted an addition. But we ended up taking the house down to the foundation and starting over," Moelleur says. And inspiration struck when she saw that the architect's plans included a long wall of dark tile: It was the perfect place for a 10-foot aquarium.

Conveniently, the wall backed up to a utility room. Moelleur discussed her plan for a saltwater tank with Jim Karanikas of Tropical Fish World, but he had a different idea.

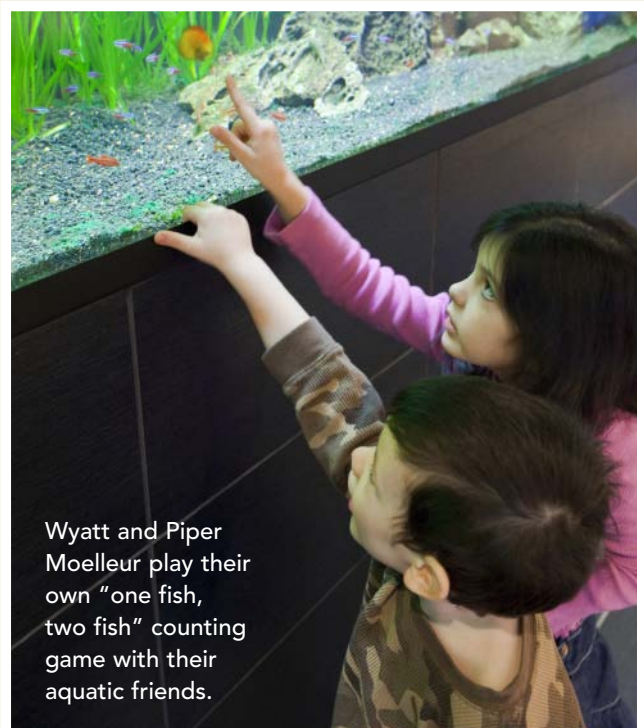
"Their home has a lot of windows that open up to the woods and a creek that's out there," says Karanikas. "I thought freshwater with a lot of green plants would complement the outside."

Moelleur now agrees. "A saltwater tank would have looked out of place," she says. "He educated me that you can have colorful fish in a freshwater tank. It really brings the outside in."

The aquarium has an automatic water changing system, and Karanikas comes once a month, but Moelleur maintains the tank herself between visits, including feeding and water testing.

"I love the delicate balance of keeping them healthy," she says. "The kids love it when I feed the fish. It's fun to teach them about another ecosystem."

Even the biggest skeptic of all has changed his mind. "My architect resisted at first," said Moelleur, but now, "he's happy. He's a big convert."



Wyatt and Piper Moelleur play their own "one fish, two fish" counting game with their aquatic friends.