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Fish Are Friends – NOT Food!

Some Practical Tips For Purchasing And Caring For A Betta Fish

Betta Fish, also known as Siamese Fighting Fish, are America's most popular freshwater fish – even more popular than the classic goldfish in a bowl. Bettas have personality, unique colorations, and are very inexpensive and easy to manage. So, if you're looking for a new friend to add to your family, look no further! Here's a practical guide, written by a practical, ten year Betta owner, to caring for your Betta.

Finding Fishy

Choosing a Betta is nearly as important as taking care of one. Bettas can live up to six years, so it's important to find one that you like. It's like a six year marriage – if you don't love the Betta, you'll find yourself frustrated and looking to dump it off on somebody else...okay maybe it's not *quite* like a marriage, but you should choose a fish you love.

One of the most important qualities to look for is the health and overall condition of the fish. Pet stores, like PetSmart or local operations, Wal-Mart, and a variety of other sources sell Bettas, and nearly all of these dealers confine the fish in small plastic cups that are about the size that a doctor would use for a urine test. The water quality in the cup is a good indicator of the potential health of the fish. Choose a fish that has clear water, free from flaky pollutants – a difficult task in some stores.

Quick Checklist:

Estimated Total Cost: \$39

- ✓ **Bowl or Aquarium \$3**
- ✓ **Fish Net \$2**
- ✓ **Betta Food \$4**
- ✓ **Water Conditioner \$5**
- ✓ **Gravel \$4**
- ✓ **Decorations/Plants \$15**
- ✓ **Betta \$6**

Note: Food and Conditioner last about 1 year; Bettas live up to 6 years; Other items last a life-time unless damaged or a change is desired

In addition, examine the fish carefully. Does it have ragged fins? Are there white spots covering the body? Does it look like it is having difficulty breathing or swimming? If so *don't* buy the fish – unless of course, you want it to look like this in a few days:



*This is self-explanatory. Photo = dead Betta.
Photo from Google Images.*

Some other important characteristics to seek are color and tail style. Bettas come in a rainbow assortment of colors: cellophane (essentially clear), yellow, steel blue, red, black and other colors, as well as all sorts of combinations. Bettas also have an array of tail fin styles – from the traditional V-shaped veiltail Bettas to the sunburst tail shaped crowntail Bettas – so choose the combination of tail and color that you like best.

Bettas also vary in price based on gender and perceived aesthetic quality. Most Bettas for sale are males due to their beautiful fins and bold colors; you can buy female Bettas for cheaper than males, but it is my experience that females are usually not as attractive and “showy” as males, though I have owned both at various times. The average cost is between \$3 and \$12, but some

exotic dealers on eBay and other Internet sources sell Bettas upwards of \$85. Remember that beauty *is* in the eye of the beholder, so if you don't find a fish that is pretty and healthy, simply high tail it out of the store and try again another day.

A Home For Fishy

You should set up an aquarium of some sort prior to purchasing your fish. I have had success keeping Bettas in bowls that hold approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a gallon of water. However, many experts claim that Bettas require *at least* 3 gallons, despite the fact that Bettas only grow to be a maximum of 3 inches long from mouth to tail tip. My fish have survived for years in the smaller

bowls, so smaller bowls are what I recommend for all practicality concerns. I don't think it would be any fun to have a very large tank with one teeny-tiny fish in it, and I find that the smaller bowls are perfectly aesthetic for me and perfectly suitable for the fish. Plus, smaller bowls are more economical as you can find old flower vases that can house your Betta at places like Goodwill for as cheap as \$3,



Male Red and White Marble Plakat



Male Orange Crowntail



Male Blue Halfmoon



Male Blue and Orange Feather

Examples of Betta Colors and Tail Types
Photos from Google Images

as opposed to spending up to \$30 for a started tank at a pet store.

Decorating the bowl is the fun part. You will want a base of gravel about 1" deep to act as a filter for uneaten food and excrement. I usually like natural looking habitats, but you can find an array of gravel colors – from sparkly pink or shiny green to black. If you decide to decorate the

bowl with plants, be sure to use silk plants. Bettas have very delicate fins and using hard, plastic plants with jagged edges is sure to shred the fins, especially if the Betta likes to swim through the plants. Other ornaments, such as rock formations, Sponge-Bob figures, and much more, can be found at a local fish store.

Bettas are solitary creatures. The “fighting fish” nickname is not for show. Male Bettas are extremely aggressive; therefore, you can only have one in an aquarium. Sometimes, if two males are in bowls close enough that the fish can see each other, they will become preoccupied with and aggressive toward the other male. This is a simple fix: just place a piece of paper between the bowls so the Bettas can’t see each other and – voilà – problem solved. Keeping females together is not recommended either.

After decorating the bowl or aquarium, fill it with clean tap water. Squirt a little bit – just a drop or two – of the water conditioner into the fresh water to remove any harsh chemicals in the water that may harm your fish. Let the habitat sit so the water can become room temperature before putting your Betta into the bowl.

Bringing Fishy Home

Once you find a Betta you want and have purchased it, bring it home immediately. Avoid leaving the fish in your car while you finish errands, regardless of how beautiful the weather is because the Betta may overheat and die. Most pet stores will place the fish on hold if you have more shopping to do before heading home.

Do not forget to also buy food. Stores will sell pellets or flakes that are “specially formulated” to enhance the Betta’s color. In reality, all Betta foods seem to have the same ingredients, so if you want to save money, go with a cheaper food – don’t skimp on the beauty of the Betta.

Once you get the Betta home, it is time to put it into its new home. Since the water in the Betta's bowl is room temperature, you should allow the water in the Betta's cup from the store to acclimate to room temperature because the car ride home is likely to have changed the water temperature. If you immediately put the Betta into the new bowl, the rapid change in water temperature may stun or kill your fish.

The Not-So-Hard Hard Part Of Keeping Fishy Alive

A. Water Changes

Now that you have brought the fish home and have transferred the Betta to its bowl, the maintenance begins. Don't worry, though, Bettas are not very dirty fish. Goldfish produce a lot of ammonia and require a hefty filter to keep the water clean. Bettas, on the other hand, will only require a water change about once a week, though on occasion, an every other week water change will be sufficient.

When changing the water, put clean tap water into a container and allow the water to sit at room

Quick Guide to Water Changes:

- 1. Fill a container with clean water**
- 2. Allow to sit at room temperature for an hour**
- 3. Transfer Betta from its bowl to the container**
- 4. Clean the Betta's bowl with water**
- 5. Pour some water from the fresh container into the Betta's usual bowl**
- 6. Transfer Betta from container to its bowl**
- 7. Finish pouring the clean water into the bowl**

temperature for at least an hour. I recommend using a conditioner such as AquaSafe with every water change to eliminate the harmful substances, like chlorine, found in tap water. When the fresh water has adapted temperature, simply catch your Betta using a net, and transfer it to the clean water container. Clean the Betta's normal bowl with water only, as soap residue may kill your fish. Make sure to sift through the gravel, eliminating the uneaten food. Pour some of the clean water back into the Betta's normal bowl; using the net, catch the Betta and put it in the bowl; finish filling the bowl with the remainder of the clean water.

B. Feeding

Feed your Betta twice a day. The stomach of a fish is about the size of its eye, so a small amount of food is all that is necessary. If you overfeed, your fish may develop health problems or you may need to clean the water more often because of uneaten food residue. Don't be paranoid, though, feeding is not rocket science: one or two pellets, or a few small flakes, are plenty for your fish.

I admit that I have left my fish at home for a week without food while I was on vacation, and they survived. Fish are supposed to be able to live two weeks without food, but if you are going to miss feeding the Betta more than one week, I would set up a system where a friend could check on the Betta at least once during your trip to feed it and maybe change its water. Bettas are very hardy, so any minor errors or missed water changes are most likely not life threatening to the fish.

Now What?

Just enjoy your fish! Bettas can become quite friendly and certainly have big personalities. I *Eiffel as a youngster* had a purple Betta named Eiffel that kept me company during my first college year and beyond; unfortunately, nature has taken its course in Eiffel's life. Every time I would walk even remotely close to his bowl, he would begin swimming up and down the front of the bowl as if in a frenzy; I felt quite happy that he was so excited to see me – plus, he usually received a small amount of food as a treat, which definitely played into his excitement. Take

Recommended Websites

BettaTalk.com – For all things Betta

AquariumGuys.com – For quick tips for caring for Bettas and other fish

PetSmart.com – For fish care supplies



time to enjoy your Betta and you, too, can build a bond with your fish.

Bettas take some responsibility and time, but they are well worth the effort. With these tips, you can successfully manage to keep a Betta fish as a friend. For more resources and information, please visit the recommended sites. Happy Betta buying!

