



Basic aquarium cleaning tools like scrubbers are part of an arsenal of products you can offer to help customers rid their tanks of algae.

Keeping Algae Under Control

Help your customers choose the best algae control products for their situation so they can spend less time on cleaning and maintenance. By Jennifer Pinkley

Algae is a normal part of every aquarium, but algae that grows out of control can quickly turn a beautiful aquarium into a maintenance nightmare. However, if you help customers understand the basics of algae control, they'll be able to enjoy crystal clear tanks and healthy animals—with a minimal amount of work.

Luckily, many products on the market today help with all aspects of algae control. We'll take a look at some here. But first, let's talk about proper setup and maintenance fundamentals.

Setup and Maintenance

The first steps in effective algae control include setting up the tank correctly and conducting basic maintenance. "Algae in

properly maintained aquariums should not be an issue," said Tom Sarac of Rolf C. Hagen (USA) Corp. (Mansfield, Mass.). "The goal should be setting up the tank and maintaining it in such a way that algae is at a disadvantage."

Sarac offered some tips to help hobbyists focus on correctly managing an aquarium:

- **Grow a few plants.** Plants are beneficial for several reasons. First, they absorb nutrients that can otherwise lead to algae growth. Second, they absorb light and shade the tank, reducing the amount of light available to algae.

- **Control the light.** A light timer is a great way to make sure plants get enough light, but not too much to fuel algae growth. (Plus, timers help save

electricity.) Be sure customers know that direct sunlight can trigger algae growth.

- **Test the water.** Recommend regular water chemistry testing to ensure nitrate, ammonia and phosphate levels are within normal ranges. Also recommend customers use a phosphate home test kit to make sure tap water is balanced; if customers fill up and change aquariums with tap water that has higher than normal levels of phosphate, algae may quickly create a very annoying problem.

- **Recommend food low in ash and phosphorus.** "Excess phosphorus or ash in aquarium fish food is in fact a food source for algae," said Sarac. Recommend brands low in phosphorus and ash to customers struggling with chronic algae problems.

- **Educate customers about overfeeding.** Many hobbyists overfeed fish, leading to excess organic matter dropping to the bottom of the aquarium. Decomposing food at the bottom of a tank not only is messy, it can fuel algae growth. Reducing the amount of food that settles to the bottom goes a long way toward keeping algae under control. Explain the problems that overfeeding creates, and help customers understand how to correctly measure the amount of food for daily feedings. This might even be a good topic for employee training since figuring out the right amount of food often is considered more of an art than a science.

- **Advocate algae-eating fish.** Adding just one or two algae-loving fish to a tank can make a big difference in algae control. Encourage customers to keep at least one. Recommend varieties that fit well with the tank size. Adding one or two otocinclus (a small algae eater) or plecostomus (a large algae eater) may help control many chronic algae problems.

- **Suggest supplements to help balance water chemistry.** Many water supplements can help get chronic water chemistry problems under control. Water conditioners can help ensure harmful chemicals are neutralized in tap water. Other additives help break down organic waste and keep undesirable nutrients like phosphorus and nitrates under control.

For example, Hagen's Nutrafin Waste Control helps break down and digest organic substances, said Sarac. This can

include excess food, fish waste and plant matter. Useful in aquariums with fish that produce excess waste (such as goldfish and cichlids) or heavily populated aquariums, it produces ammonia as a byproduct as it works.

A second supplement, Nutrafin Cycle, removes ammonia and nitrite from the water, creating a two-step solution. These products have an added benefit of populating the aquarium with biological fauna that compete with algae for macro-nutrients such as phosphate. "Of course, these may not always eliminate algae growth, but they are important first steps in controlling it," said Sarac.

Mechanical Tools

For minor algae problems, such as algae growing on the side of the



The Algae Mitt from Python Products lets customers get into hard-to-reach corners to wipe away algae.



Python's No Spill Clean and Fill siphon uses medical grade tubing to help water flow easily and decrease the amount of time involved in tank cleaning.

aquarium or on rocks, you can recommend one of the huge variety of scrapers, brushes and scrub pads on the market. The key to recommending such products is to understand the customer's aquarium.

Scrapers are great tools that come in many shapes, sizes and materials. First, find out if the aquarium is glass or acrylic. Make sure you don't recommend a stainless steel scraper

for an acrylic aquarium since steel will scratch acrylic. Many scrapers are suitable for either glass or acrylic. There are even models appropriate for use on scratched glass.

The length of the scraper handle may or may not be important. Ask the customer if they care about sticking their whole arm into a large aquarium to scrape off algae. If this is an issue, you will know to recommend brands with long or

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Used together, Hagen's Nutrafin Waste Control and Nutrafin Cycle can help control algae growth by eliminating detritus that can fuel algae growth and populating the aquarium with biological fauna that compete with algae for macro-nutrients.

adjustable handles.

Magnet brushes are another option. These consist of two pieces: a brush inside the aquarium and a piece that controls the brush from outside the aquarium. A strong magnet holds the two pieces together, allowing hobbyists to clean even large tanks without getting wet. Some brands also feature a floating brush—if the magnet gets dislodged, the brush inside the tank simply floats to the surface.

There also are a wide range of scrub pads available. One product that makes it easier to clean corners, décor and hard-to-reach areas is the Algae Mitt. "Just put it on your hand and clean the algae off," said Lance Reyniers, president of Python Products Inc. (Milwaukee).

Just make sure customers know they shouldn't buy scrubbers at a grocery store, as many kitchen scrubbers are infused with harsh chemicals that may harm aquarium dwellers.

Vacuum Tools

Other important algae control tools suction debris out of the tank. One of the simplest tools is siphon tubing, but customers need to know this technique can be a bit messy.

To effectively use siphon tubing, make sure a bucket that the siphon can drain into is placed at least two feet below the



water level. To create a stronger vacuum, place the bucket even farther from the aquarium. (Place small fish in fish bags if you are creating a strong vacuum. Otherwise, the fish might get sucked into the tube.)

To make vacuuming easier, several automatic siphons are available that attach directly to kitchen sink faucets. For example, Python's No Spill Clean and Fill uses medical grade tubing to help water flow easily. According to Reyniers, this product decreases the amount of work involved in regular tank cleaning. "A job that used to take the better part of an hour with siphon tubing now takes 15 minutes," he said.

The No Spill is also durable. "I have people tell me that they've been using their original product for 25 years," said Reyniers.

Algaecides are highly concentrated liquid products that treat large volumes of water. While some hobbyists routinely use algaecides, others are reluctant to use them because they are afraid they will harm or kill their fish. However, these products are safe for aquarium use (except for aquariums with invertebrates) as long as customers follow the instructions.

Algaecides

"It's very wise to read and follow the

instructions to the letter," said Terry Williams, director of marketing for Kordon L.L.C. (Hayward, Calif.), maker of AlgaeQuel.

Store owners must be sure to clearly explain how to figure out how much algaecide to use in a tank and how to apply the product. The key is to add algaecide next to the filter outflow so it will quickly mix with the water. "If you add algaecide too close to a fish, the product might harm it," said Mark Krupka, vice president and technical director for Ecological Laboratories Inc. (Malverne, N.Y.), maker of Microbe-Lift Algaway 5.4.

Also, be sure to tell customers to only add the specified amount. Some customers may think "if one ounce works fine, then three ounces will work even better!" Too much algaecide may lead to problems with both fish and live plants.

"Algaecide is more of a mechanical barrier than a poison," said Krupka, "but it can have a toxic effect if used at higher than recommended dosage levels. Like aspirin, it's perfectly safe unless you take a whole bottle, then it could kill you."

Many hobbyists using algaecide for the first time may not understand that they will need to manually remove dead algae from the tank. "The No. 1 source of confusion with algaecide is what you can expect," said Williams. "Most products kill the algae; that's not a problem. The trick is it doesn't actually remove dead algae from the tank."

Krupka offered a final bit of advice. "Be absolutely sure that the algaecide you sell is registered with the Environmental Protection Agency."

Algae control products must be approved by the EPA for use as an algaecide; if you sell algaecide that isn't approved, you could face stiff fines. You can check the technical specification sheets and actual packaging for EPA registration numbers.

If you can help customers pick the best algae control products for their situation, the amount of time they have to spend on cleaning and maintenance will go down—and customer satisfaction will go up. ■

Jennifer Pinkley is a freelance writer based in Ardmore, Tenn. She frequently writes on environmental and science topics.