

Solving the problem of pest snails

Anyone that has kept fish for any length of time has probably encountered it: a sudden explosion of snails, seemingly out of nowhere. While a few snails can be a benefit to your tank, eating up detritus and algae, but snails rarely stop at just a few individuals. And besides being unsightly in large numbers, they can also chew up and wipe out your plants.

The problem species:



Pond snails (*Physa* and *Physella* spp.)



Ramshorn snails (*Planorbis* spp.)



Malaysian live-bearing snails (*Melanoides tuberculata*), in huge numbers are a pest, but a few of them are thought to be beneficial to a tank as they help stir up and aerate your gravel.

But where do they come from? We didn't add them to our tank, so how do they get in there?

The truth is we *did* introduce them, accidentally, usually when we add plants or new new fish. Snail eggs are tiny and translucent and adhere to plant leaves, so they are very difficult to spot and remove. Floating eggs or baby snails can get scooped up while catching fish and put in the bag with them. To make matters worse, these snails are also hermaphroditic, so you only need one and a food source to have a population explosion.

Prevention

Physical removal – The most obvious option, physically removing any visible snails from plants, can also be the most impractical, as most snails are going to be tiny, or in eggs, which are very hard to see. When adding fish, do not add the water from the bag, as eggs can accidentally be scooped up with fish (this also helps prevent adding any other pathogens to your tank).



Potassium permanganate – This common chemical is sold at hardware stores, and is a strong oxidizer. Soak plants in a solution mixed according to the package directions for 10 – 20 minutes. Rinse in dechlorinator and rinse well in fresh water before adding to your tank. Potassium permanganate can be very caustic on the skin, so extreme caution and care should be used.

Bleach – Yes, a bleach bath will kill snails and their eggs. Soak new plants in a 5% solution (about ¼ cup of bleach in a gallon of water) for no more than 2 minutes for sensitive plants and 3 minutes for hardier plants. Rinse the plants very

well in water treated with tap water conditioner (it'll neutralize the bleach), then in plain water, before adding to your tank.

Cut down on feeding/water changes – Extra fish food in the tank just feeds snail baby booms. Limiting food, and removing waste by doing water changes, limits how many snails your tank can support.

Feeding tip: Feed only as much food as all your fish can eat in 30 seconds, and feed smaller meals more frequently. It'll help limit the number of snails, and also keep your ammonia and nitrites manageable.

Eradication

Physically removing them - Pest snails can be caught and physically removed from an aquarium, either by hand or by using a bait trap. Late evening, place some bait – a leaf of lettuce or a slice of cucumber – under a tilted cup or in a plastic container with holes. The snails will be attracted to this easy meal during the night when they normally eat. Remove the bait and the snails later that night or in the early morning. Wrap the snails in plastic and throw them away.



It's important to NOT flush them down the toilet, as there is a chance they can get into local water ways, where they can become a pest and interfere with native wildlife.

Chemical controls (molluscicides) – There are additives that can be used in aquariums to kill off snails, but we're not big fans of them. They can make fish ill and ruin plants, and will also kill off any invertebrates in your tank (shrimps and crabs). And the sudden deaths will cause an ammonia spike (so you'd need to do a lot of water changes to handle the organic debris, which is more work on your part). We're also not big fans of adding chemicals unless they are absolutely necessary.

Fish that eat snails – There are several species of fish that love to munch on snails, like pea or green puffers and the clown loach. These fish, though, are not a great solution for many people, as the green puffers are brackish and need some salt and both are quite aggressive. Clown loaches get rather large, need more space and very soft substrate to thrive.

Our favorite solution: another snail! It sounds counter-intuitive to add another snail to a tank already over run with them, but the assassin snail is almost the perfect solution to pests. Their small size means they work well in every size tank, and they can be quite voracious when eating other snails. Once the infestation is gone, these snails happily feed on fish food while leaving your fish alone.



The more natural solutions to snail infestations can take some time to resolve the problem, but can stop the proliferation and slowly diminish the problem in a more gentle and easier manner.