

A Primer on Bagging Fish

Excerpt by Mike Hellweg (reprinted from "Mike's Fishroom" in the Journal of the American Livebearer Association. www.livebearers.org).

This issue we'll look at bagging fish properly. It seems like a topic we should all know and understand pretty well, but looking at many of the fish in the Sunday auction at the convention, many of us could use a little reminder, and some newer folks need some pointers. There were many fish that were improperly bagged for a one day auction, much less the three or four days they were going to be in the bags for a weekend long convention, and some of the folks whose names were on the bags should have known better!

The key to properly bagging fish is to avoid as much stress on the fish as possible. Stressors to bagged fish are things like using too small a bag, adding too many fish to the bag, not using enough air, pollutant build up in the water, and with livebearers, bagging females that are close to term. If you can't think of the fish's welfare, look at it this way – if the fish are stressed, dying, or even dead in the bag, who is going to buy them? Even an expensive and rare fish with a dead fish in the bag will bring much less than a bag of healthy fish will bring. Bag them properly from the start and you'll be sure to ensure the health of the fish and bring the maximum price for you.

The first thing is to properly prepare. Make sure you have plenty of new bags of the proper size. Don't re-use bags. Old bags can spread disease, and often have slight damage that can turn into a full-blown leak when they are reused.

PURGE the fish for a few days before bagging them. I move them to an empty critter tank with just a small sponge filter and don't feed them anything. Over the ensuing couple of days, I change the water with fresh water each day, so by the time I bag them, they will be in mostly clean, new water. I then use a 50/50 mix of water from the holding tank and new water that has been dechlorinated and aerated overnight. Leaving them in a healthy tank might seem like a good thing, but there are all kinds of munchies in a healthy tank that they will continue eating while you think they are being purged. Purging allows their guts to be empty so they won't be producing a large amount of waste in the bag. At the convention, I even

heard some folks say that they had given the fish a good meal for the weekend before bagging them! That's the worst thing you can do! Fish are NOT mammals and do not need to eat every day. Residents of most of our aquaria could easily go a week or more without food and be none the worse for wear.

I always add an ammonia remover to the bag, too. Each person will likely have their own favorite product, and in spite of what you read on the internet about how superior one product or another is, all work equally well. Some folks also add salt to cut down on osmotic stress on the fish while they are bagged. I've never found the need to do that, but it can help in certain situations. Finally, some folks also add a small square of Polyfilter to the bag. That works well with sensitive fish, but really is a bit of overkill for most fish unless you are loading the bag with fish that haven't been purged first.

Never put a bunch of adults in a small bag. Use a 12 inch or larger bag. Otherwise, adult fish will not only be crowded, but will also quickly use up the oxygen in the bag. While a 1.5 or 2 mil bag will allow some oxygen exchange, it's not enough to keep up with the fish's oxygen use in the bag. Instead of one bag with a dozen adults, why not do two bags with a half dozen each, or three bags with a couple of pairs each?

When you bag fish, the "golden rule" is to use one third of the volume as water and two thirds air. If you use oxygen instead of air, you can go 50/50 water to air. Some of the bags I saw at the convention were 90% water! Water doesn't hold as much oxygen as air, so using more air than water allows for more oxygen for the fish's use over the weekend.

Improper bagging doesn't do any good to the fish, the buyer, or your sale price. So use a bit of common sense, think of how you would like to buy the bag, and review these bagging tips before bagging fish.