Some Rules for Dutch Style Aquascaping— A Quick Guide for Beginners

by Vin Kutty

American hobbyists looking for guidance and rules of traditional Dutch style aquascaping have very few English-language resources to learn from. This article is adapted from my post in Tom Barr's forum, The Barr Report. It explains some of the rules and techniques and is written with the novice American aquascaper (noobs!) in mind.

It is far easier to learn from mistakes than successes, so I've used several 'bad' examples from my tanks to show you what not to do.

SECTION ONE:
GETTING STARTED

Dutch style can seem old, rigid, and somewhat inflexible to Nature Aquarium style fans. And, yes, there are a lot of rules, but following rules is only important if you plan on entering your tank in contests. Still, keep in mind that this form of aquascaping is almost 80 years old and these rules evolved over the decades for a reason–they work! Following the rules simply gets you a better-looking tank.

1. MUST HAVE STRONG CONTRAST BETWEEN GROUPS

This may be the most important Dutch style rule of all. Strong contrast between groups of plants is one of the most important features of a good Dutch aquascape. Knowing how tightly and densely to pack each stem in a bush is a skill that can only be mastered through experience. You need time to get to know the likes and dislikes of each species. Some plants, like *Eriocaulon lineare* or *E. setaceum*, melt if crowded and under sub-optimal conditions, while they can handle more crowding under optimal conditions. However, stem plants that are planted too loosely make the tank look messy and lacking cohesion.

This is why Dutch 'scaping is the realm of diehard plant lovers and horticulturists. Hardscaping is gorgeous. But Dutch aquascaping will force you to learn about plants. No other style teaches you more about them.

You need dramatic contrasts. Always think of contrast in leaf shape, size, texture, brightness, and height.

EXAMPLES:
• Place a *Barclaya longifolia* next to *Ludwigia inclinata* Pantanal.

• Add *Ludwigia inclinata* Pantanal next to *Cyperus helferi*.

• Place an *Eriocaulon* next to *Alternanthera reineckii* 'mini'.

• If you have *Hygrophila corymbosa*, use a red plant with tiny leaves next to it like *Rotala wallichii* or a short rosette plant.

• A bold-leafed plant (*Persicaria sp.* Sao Paulo) should be next to a demure soft, fuzzy plant (*Mayaca fluviatilis*).

2. LEAVE ROOM FOR A CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN GROUPS OF PLANTS. *This is tied to proper trimming and floor layout.*

When you set up a Dutch style tank, know what the floor plan will be. When you execute the floor plan, allow plenty of empty space between groups of plants.

An inch or two between groups of plants is good to start with. This will ensure that when the plants are fully grown that you will have a finger width (or two) of empty space between groups. Space makes plant groups more distinct. It increases the perception of contrast between groups of plants.

Allowing plant species to intermingle is a Nature Aquarium technique. Keeping groups separated also allows for better circulation of CO2 rich water in flow-dead spots.

3. HEIGHT VARIATION IS IMPORTANT. *If all of your foreground plants are 3" tall and all of your midground plants are 8" tall and all of your background plants are an even 20" tall, it will look weird.*

Use a short Monte Carlo or *Elatine triandra* in the foreground
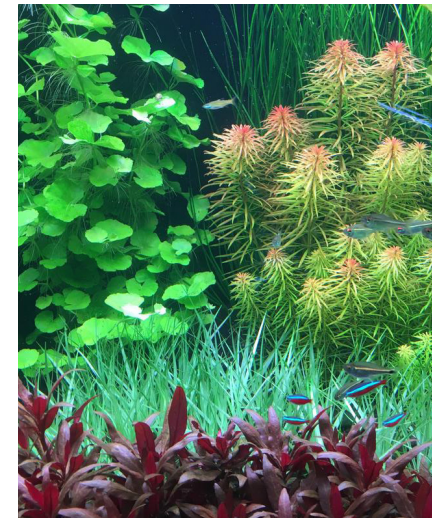
^ *Every now and then, I'm happy with the contrasts I end up with...*

v *While generally appealing and healthy, there are several mistakes here. This tank has too many red plants. Hardware is showing. The Dutch plant street is very poorly defined. There is a giant black spot in the top center of the back wall that could use a moss wall. Many plants are too close together and in dire need of a trim.*
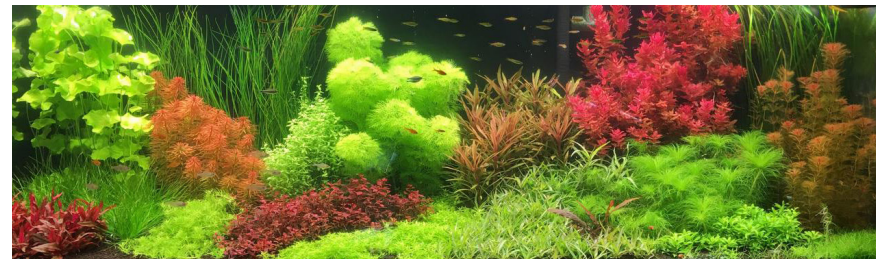
^∨ *What might feel like excessive segregation of plants during trimming (above) will self-correct and become very natural-looking with time (below).*

∨ *There are five red plants in this 'scape that are all roughly the same height. Not good.*

Alternantera reineckii 'mini' or *Staurogyne spraguei* (Porto Velho).

Even taller plants like *Blyxa japonica* or *Cryptocoryne wendtii* can be used as both fore and midground plants.

Having a moss or fern wall on the background will help background plant bushes of varying height seem smooth.

It is possible to have a foreground full of exclusively 3" tall plants if you use *Staurogyne repens, Alternanthera reineckii* 'mini,' and *Eriocaulon* sp. Vietnam. That evenness would not look good.

How's this for an idea? Consider showing a hint of foreground gravel in one or two places between plants.

4. DON'T FORGET LEAF SIZE VARIATION. *Not having leaf size variety reduces contrast and makes the tank look boring. Stem-plant-itis causes this issue with hobbyists who are transitioning from Nature style aquascapes.*

EXAMPLE:
- Don't plant *Ludwigia brevipes* next to *Rotala rotundifolia* and that next to *Didiplis diandra* and *Mayaca fluviatilis*. That's simply not enough contrast.
- You need one plant with **BIG** leaves. Maybe an *Echinodorus* or *Aponogeton* or *Barclaya, Nymphaea, Lagenandra, Anubias,* or *Nuphar*. Even a stem plant like *Hygrophila corymbosa* can work.
- If your tank is six feet or longer, you may be able to get away with more than one big-leaved plant. But you need at least one.

5. ...AND LEAF SHAPE VARIATION. *See point above.*

Don't do these things:
- A *Bacopa caroliniana* next to *Acmella repens* next to *Rotala macrandra* 'green'.
- *Lindernia rotundifolia* next to *Lysimachia nummularia*.
- *Persicaria* sp. Sao Paulo next to *Hygrophila salicofolia*, even though there is strong color variation. These two are too similar in leaf shape.
- *Echinodorus* next to *Aponogeton*.
- *Anubias* next to *Bucephalandra*.

6. ONE SPECIES PER 10 CM/4 IN. OR THREE SPECIES PER FOOT OF TANK LENGTH.
This is where most people struggle.

It takes planning and restraint to limit the number of species. It also takes discipline to stay with this limitation. It is simply too easy to allow species count to creep up. So what's the problem with this?

- Too many species makes the tank busy, restless, and crowded.
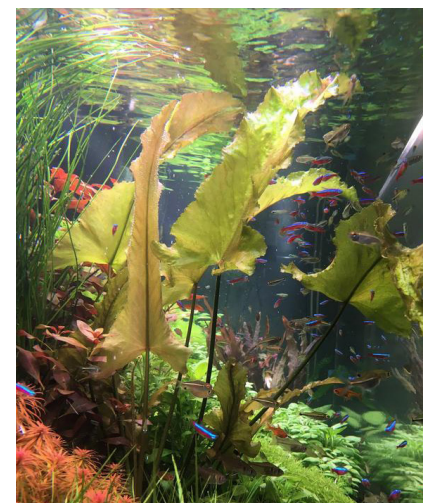
∧ *Unusually large-leaved plants like this* Nuphar lutea *are good to force leaf shape variation.*

∨ *Here, I focused too much on color variation and placed this* Ludwigia *sp. 'red' next to the* Oldenlandia salzmanii – *a mistake.*
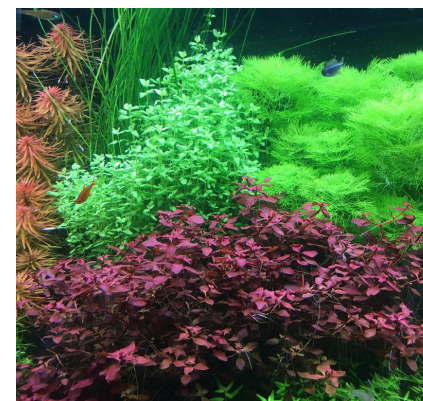
- Small groups of plants also make the tank seem crowded.
- Do not use same species in more than one location.

7. DON'T PLANT A FOREGROUND OF JUST ONE SPECIES–LEFT TO RIGHT, FULL TANK LENGTH OF ONE SPECIES.

Don't do it. This imparts a golf course effect. A left wall to right wall carpet of Staurogyne repens *or* Micranthemum tweedei *(Monte Carlo) may look lush, but this does two things that work against visual appeal:*

- It makes the tank lose front to back depth. The midground and background look like a tall wall, like you're on a boat on the ocean coming up on a cliff.
- It lacks foreground diversity. The sameness doesn't offer anything of variety and interest for your eyes to rest on.

8. MID-GROUND PLANTS ARE CRITICAL.

This is tied to the above rule about using only one species in the foreground, but there is a slightly distinct point to be made: missing midground plants are a chronic problem in beginners' Dutch tanks.

Without midground plants, the tank will lack a feeling of depth.

- Avoid a carpet of foreground plants + a wall of tall background plants.
- Any plant that is a third to half the height of the tank can make good a midground plant.
- Slow-growing plants make good midground candidates, but if you are willing to trim often, you can use taller and faster growing stem plants.

9. FOCAL POINT PLANTS ARE CRITICAL.

They give the eye a place to rest and return. Visually, our eyes start the experience here. Eyes wander off, but are always peripherally tethered to the focal points. This also prevents symmetry, a kiss of death in this type of styling.

- Look up **Rule of Thirds** and **Golden Ratio** on Google. This will tell you where to place the biggest and brightest look-at-me focal point plants. This will also ensure that you place these plants in spots so your tank is not divided down the middle into two equal parts.
- If you follow the rule of thirds, you will have the option of four focal point placements: left front, left back, right front, and right back.
- Do not put a focal point plant in all four–that will look really odd. One or two focal points will do. If you do two, go with front left and back right, or back left and front right.

∧ *Moderately slow-growing plants like this* Staurogyne spatulata *make good candidates for mid-ground species.*

∧ *This tank is not Dutch style, but rather a jungle style tank. It is impossible to provide definition and contrast when you have too many species. The top tank has about 28 species. The ideal for a six-foot tank is 18.*

∨ *This is the same tank, re-scaped with 19 species. While still far from good, it is starting to feel right.*

∨ *One of my older tanks before I realized the importance of mid-ground plants.*

EXAMPLE:

Well-trimmed red lotus in the front left focal point can work well with a bush of *Rotala macrandra* or *Ludwigia inclinata* var. Pantanal in the back right. I say 'well-trimmed lotus' because that is the only way to keep a *Nymphaea* species from sending out floating leaves or sore-thumb leaves that stick out in an ungainly way. This tip also works best with a tank that is three times longer than it is tall. Example: a 180 gallon tank that is 6 feet long and 2 feet high works nicely (front panel is 3 squares). But a 120 gallon tank that's 4 feet wide and 2 feet tall (front panel is exactly two squares) will require you to work harder at avoiding symmetry.

∨ *Focal point plants like* Eichhornia azurea *are effective at arresting the eye, but perhaps you should choose a slightly less illegal species for your tank.*

10. SHOW A LITTLE BACK WALL.

Contrary to popular belief, Dutch style tanks should not have wall-to-wall dense planting. You can allow the viewer to see the back wall of the tank in a small patch–this adds to the feeling of depth.

If you have a plain back wall it should be visible through a small area between plant groups.

- The exclusive use of opaque and dense background plants that completely block the back wall will reduce perception of depth.

- You can make the back wall visible even through a bush. *Acmella repens, Lindernia sp., Persicaria sp., Hygrophila salicifolia, Pogostemon quadrifolius* do not form dense bushes, so they are good for creating see-through groups in the background.

- Plants like *Limnophila, Pogostemon* sp. Kimberley, *Ludwigia inclinata* Cuba, *Hygrophila difformis*, and even some *Rotala* and *Ludwigia* have the ability to become completely opaque as they get closer to the surface. Keep this in mind.

11. AVOID TOO MANY RED PLANTS.

This is a personal weakness; I enjoy breaking this rule. Many American hobbyists attempting Dutch for the first time have too-much-red-itis. After all, who doesn't like red plants? They look like flowers! It's hard to resist.

One or two red plants at focal points is enough. Put another way, no more than a quarter of the species should be orange/red/pink.

Judges typically view this as over-the-top, tacky, and over-emotional.

12. MOSS WALL OR NO MOSS WALL?

Not having a moss wall is okay, but it's preferable to have one. Adding moss to the back wall gives the tank a feeling of depth and texture. It makes it look like there is something behind the background plants, rather than just emptiness. Moss on a wall does not count for species count, but moss on a log does.

Photo by Joe Harvey

∧ *There are many ways to create moss walls. This one, created by Joe Harvey, uses moss attached to sheets of portable black plastic mesh. He then attached the mesh to the glass using suction cups.*

SECTION TWO: CONTRAST & ANTI-SYMMETRY

This section discusses tips and tricks of how to create contrast and avoid symmetry in traditional Dutch style aquascaping. While these aren't necessarily "rules," following these guidelines will help the novice Dutch aquascaper avoid pitfalls and improve rankings in contests. Note that some of these concepts were discussed in previous articles; I'll try not to repeat myself too much.

1. OBSERVE STRICT TRIMMING

A cohesive and smooth plant bush that rises and falls without out-of-place runaway stems is important for visual appeal. Most

∨ *Example:* Ludwigia inclinata *'Pantanal' growth is fairly easy to predict after a few months of cultivation. In this image, the bush will grow smoothly.*

circular or oval bushes need to start smoothly, curve over the top and end smoothly. If you have a bush of 25 plants, you need to know how long to trim each stem and where to insert each of those in the substrate so that a few days or weeks after planting, the bush is ideal.

This is easier said than done. And while this skill takes a lot of time in the beginning, it is one worth developing. Some 'scapers get good at this quickly. Others, well, it takes decades.

- Sloppy or uneven trimming with stems of uneven height makes for untidy plant bushes.

- Don't crowd the groups of plants. Give them breathing room, about a half inch of space between groups. Giving plants space and elbow room to grow enhances the feeling of contrast. It also allows

Example: In comparison to the prior image, the Syngonanthus *and* Rotala *are poorly trimmed.*

plants to grow and expand to their best appearance.

- Don't over-trim one side of the tank. It will make the other side seem too heavy. The bigger your tank (and busier your schedule) the more likely this issue will occur.

2. AVOID A SEA OF LIGHT GREEN.

There is an abundance of light green plants. Don't overuse them. You need both light green and dark green. This is a personal foible. I often avoid dark green plants because of their reduced contrast against ADA Aquasoil. But it is important to have both light and dark green plants.

- Don't put two green stem plants next to each other. Putting two green stems next to each other means you won't have contrast between the two groups.

- If you have two light green plants next to each other, one could be a stem and the other a grass. Otherwise, put a dark green or red plant group in between.

- Use a variety of mosses, *Cryptocoryne*, *Bucephalandra*, and *Anubias* for dark green, and possibly *Echinodorus opacus* variants.

- There are also a few newer plants with cooler greens, like *Acmella repens* and *Eriocaulon lineare* that add to color variety. *E. lineare* is one of the few bluish green plants in the hobby.

- Use an earthy or brown *Cryptocoryne* in the midground somewhere.

- Use small moss-covered wood pieces to separate somewhat similar groups of plants. But don't overdo this as a separation tactic between too many groups.

3. USE A MIX OF STEMS, GRASSES, AND GIANT LEAF PLANTS.

The importance of this concept cannot be overstated. In the previous section, I already discussed variation in leaf size, shape, and color. But this is a nuanced point that addresses the need for rosette plants. While a judge may not deduct points for not having rosette plants, it is something to strongly consider for the sake of increased contrast. The hobby is overrun with stem plants.

- Balance stem plants with rosettes.

- Grasses, *Echinodorus*, *Cryptocoryne*, *Eriocaulon*, *Nymphaea* all act as foils to a sea of stem plants. But don't put two grasses next to each other.

- Rosettes, Crypts and swords are often considered unhip. If using established, old school plants is a turn off to your hipster sensibilities, keep in mind that there are new species of rosettes being discovered by hobbyists and collectors every year.

- Don't forget wispy. Bold and large plants are common, but thin, wispy plants offer great contrast and make the tank seem lighter. Perfect candidates are *Eriocaulon cf. fluviatile* (Feather Duster) or the underused *Eleocharis elongata* and *Hydrothrix gardneri*.

4. DON'T PUT DARK GREEN PLANTS IN CORNERS.

Putting dark green plants in both back corners will force attention to the center of the tank and make the tank look smaller. Bright gets looked at more than dark because our eyes are naturally attracted to brighter objects. So a dark-leaved *Cabomba* or *Echinodorus* in the back corner means that area will get ignored. It's as though the tank begins where the dark plant ends and a light plant begins.

Example: This is a very poorly trimmed tank. It looks chaotic, busy, messy, overgrown, and would be quickly disqualified from a Dutch category.

Example: Give plants room to grow. This will enhance contrast as well.

Example: Use mosses and dark green plants like this Echinodorus *sp. 'Iguazu 2009' to break up bush after bush of light green.*

Example: Bacopa caroliniana *'colorata' is a unique pink, but next to the red* Rotala macrandra *Mini Type 4, it is far less effective.*
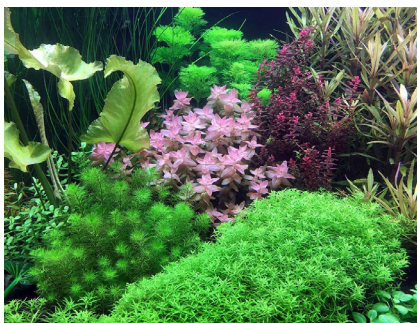
- Brighter plants in corners look better.
- The best place to position dark plants is in between or in front of bright ones.

5. DON'T PUT BRIGHT RED PLANTS IN CORNERS.

Don't put *Alternanthera reineckii* 'mini' or the like in a front corner. It distracts the eye like a shiny object in the periphery. If you take the eye away from focal points by putting a bright plant all the way in the corner, you take the eye away without a smooth return. It ruins visual flow. There is no visual pay off there besides the colorful bright spot.

6. DON'T PLACE PLANT GROUPS OF THE SAME WIDTH OR HEIGHT NEXT TO EACH OTHER.

- Don't use two groups of plants of the same width one behind the other. For example, avoid having a 5" wide group of foreground plants right in front of a 5" wide group of midground plants. It looks too contrived. Even though you might feel the entire concept of Dutch style tanks is contrived, arranging two groups of the same size like this is overkill.
- Don't make background plant bushes of the same width and height. If you have a 4-foot long tank, it would be very easy to place 5 bushes in the background, each about 8 to 10 inches wide. This sameness will reduce contrast.
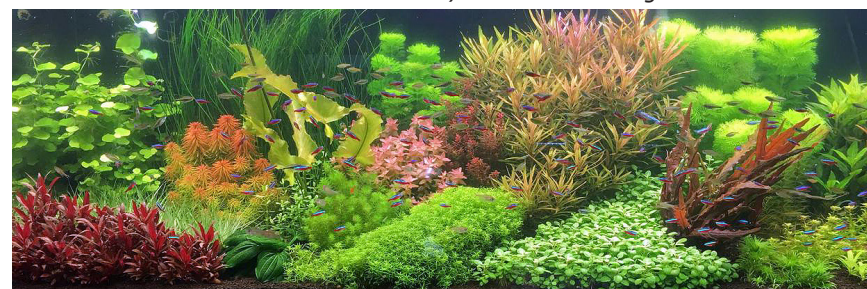
7. ADD AN ELEMENT OF CONTROLLED CHAOS.

A tankful of perfectly trimmed, vertical plants might look like soldiers on display. One or two wild-haired plants can be used to shake up that uptight stiffness. Candidates include:

- *Aponogeton ulvaceus*
- *Lagarosiphon madagascariensis*
- *Persicaria praetermissa*
- Any of the arched or sideways growing *Rotala rotundifolia* variants
- *Juncus repens*
- *Murdannia* sp. 'red'
- *Crinum calamistratum*

8. DON'T PUT TWO RED PLANTS NEXT TO EACH OTHER.

Red plants are usually used as focal points. You cannot, by definition, have two focal points next to each other. Red plants are attention hogs and two red groups next to each other will compete. Don't *even* put orange and red next to each other.

Example: Eleocharis elongata *(above) and* Eriocaulon cf. fluviatile *(Feather Duster) are good candidates for wispy plants.*

Example: Here in the foreground, Alternanthera reineckii *'mini' and 'variegated' are blended together. That does not work well.*


Example: It didn't feel like a mistake at first, but it was. The bright red plant in the corner does not work. The tank is also sorely behind on trimming.
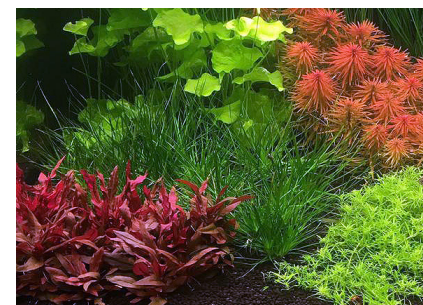
Examples: Controlled chaos is like a hair stylist working long and hard to impart a "messy look." Lagarophisphon madagascariensis *is floppy and messy. And* Aponogeton ulvaceus *is a beast that does what it wants. So, control the chaos.*

Example: This isn't red versus orange, but the Lagenandra meeboldii *'red' does not work next to the* Ludwigia senegalensis.

Examples: Both of these images are reduced by the competition between orange and red.
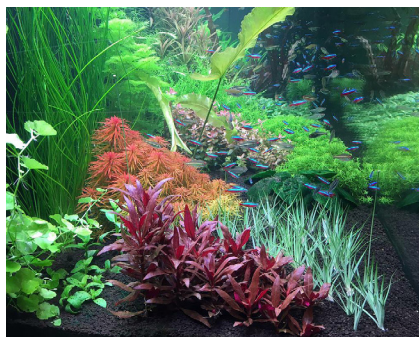
9. DON'T MIX TWO OR MORE SPECIES INTO ONE GROUP – EVEN IF THEY ARE SUBSPECIES.

This is a Nature Aquarium style technique. It reduces contrast between groups.

10. AVOID SYMMETRY AT ALL COST.

This is something you need to force yourself to think about. Fight the urge to place a focal point plant (*Nymphaea lotus* or *Aponogeton boivinianus*) or something extraordinarily bright and colorful like *Rotala macrandra* 'variegated' or *Ludwigia inclinata* 'Pantanal' right in the geometric center of the tank. Even placing a big bush or a clearly defined plant right in the middle is a mistake.

Once you've thought about it, it is relatively easy not to plant a big showy plant in the middle. Avoiding symmetry does not end there! It's secondary symmetry that will get you.

11. ...AND ALSO AVOID SECONDARY SYMMETRY.

Secondary symmetry is about avoiding minor mirror effects like equal-sized bushes on opposite sides of the tank or equally bright plants at exactly the same distance from the center. This type of symmetry is a lot harder to spot and avoid in your own tank. Ask a friend if he or she notices secondary symmetry.

The tank in the case study on the following page belongs to Joe Harvey. He won the 2017 Dutch Aquascaping category of the AGA contest with this gorgeous tank. Joe and I had discussed the tank during the pre-contest preparation. We both noticed the central position of the *Didiplis* bush and he trimmed and moved it to the left by a few inches. However, neither of us noticed the numerous secondary symmetries in this tank. There are two mirroring triangles in the foreground. There are two mirroring dark spots to either side of the *Didiplis* bush. The *Isoetes* and *Barclaya* are equidistant from the central *Didiplis* bush. We didn't notice any of this until he asked Bart Laurens to comment. Bart pointed out several of these secondary mirror images that, once revealed, become very obvious.

12. DO THE 20-FOOT SQUINT EYE TEST.

Find out if you have enough contrast between plant groups: step back 20 feet and squint your eyes. Does each group of plants stand

Example: This scene fails the 20-foot Squint Eye Test. The Lobelia *street stands defined, but everything else is cluttered, undefined and lacks visual distinction.*
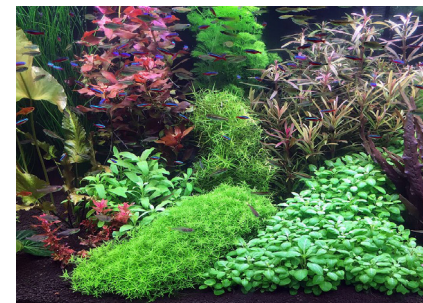
CASE STUDY

This gorgeous winning entry from Joe Harvey (in the 2017 Aquatic Gardeners Association Aquascaping contest) proves that when you've been looking at your own tank for months, it becomes difficult to spot symmetries or design traps. Joe Harvey and I had extensively discussed the progression of this tank for months before he submitted the entry. Neither one of us realized how highly mirrored this tank was until Joe sent this picture to Bart Laurens, who quickly spotted these symmetries (below). Our response was, "Damn! Bart's totally right! How'd we miss that?!?"
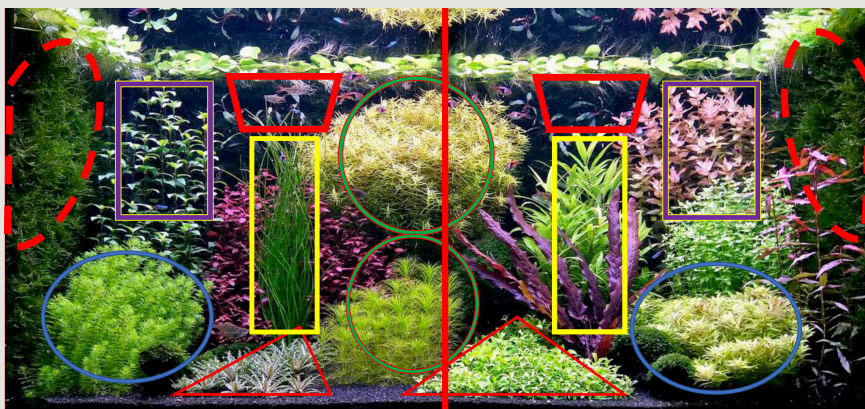
out? Or do plants in one part of the tank sort of blend together?

Another trick is to take black and white pictures and look at it on your computer screen. Or take pictures and blur them on purpose using a photo editing software to

see if any areas are blending into each other...

In the next section, we'll look at how to create attractive foregrounds. There are several common mistakes, but they're easy to avoid once you know what they are.

SECTION THREE: FOREGROUND & SUBSTRATE

One feature of Dutch aquascaping is that it doesn't use substrate terracing to create a sense of depth in the aquarium, but rather uses terracing of the plants to create that depth. A well-constructed foreground should blend seamlessly with the (taller) midground and (even taller) background plants. I will now present some tips to creating a Dutch foreground.

1. CREATE THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOREGROUND GROWTH.

Let some foreground plants almost touch the front glass while others stay an inch or two back. This is to

prevent a synthetic appearance caused by a runway/landing strip effect from a continuous strip of substrate along the front of the tank. It's fine, even recommended, to have some substrate visible near the front of the tank. A runway or landing strip all the way from the left to right end of the tank is, well, odd-looking.

2. DON'T LET FOREGROUND PLANTS CROWD AND PRESS UP AGAINST THE FRONT GLASS.

All spreading foreground plants need to be aggressively trimmed and

∨ *Example: A well-constructed foreground. In this seven-foot tank (230 cm) there are eight species of plants growing near the front glass, but the clumps are all different shapes and sizes, and there are little spaces between clumps. There are also good contrasts of leaf shape and color.*

allowed to grow back to the right size before photography or a contest.

- Foreground plants overgrown and pressed up against the glass is not a good look.
- Overgrown foreground plants are even more off-putting when you use taller plants like *Sagittaria* or *Helanthium* species that get to 3-4" tall.

3. USE SOME OPEN OR EMPTY SPACE IN THE FOREGROUND.

Every square inch of substrate does not have to planted. A little empty space gives the tank a more relaxed look.

4. FOREGROUND PLANTS SHOULD NOT BE PLANTED PERFECTLY PARALLEL TO THE FRONT GLASS.

This reduces the perception of depth. Through careful trimming,

create differently-shaped bushes and don't forget to make a street.

5. DON'T ALLOW EQUAL AMOUNT OF FLOORSPACE FOR EACH FOREGROUND PLANT.

- If you have a four-foot tank, do not keep four species of foreground plants, each occupying a foot of length. This looks artificial. Mix it up.
- It is fine to use four species of foreground plants in a four-foot long tank, but vary the amount of space and face time or floorspace that a species gets.

6. USE CURTAIN PLANTS ON THE LEFT AND RIGHT FRONT IF POSSIBLE.

This is not absolutely essential, but is a feature of many classic Dutch style tanks. Curtain plants are essentially tall, vertical plants in the

˅ *Example:* Vallisneria spiralis *'leopard' on the left and* Helanthium bolivianum *'Angustifolius' on the right serve as curtain plants. One judge's critique of the foreground was the repeated triangle shapes. Nevertheless, Joe won 2nd place in 2019!*

Photo by Joe Harvey

Photo by Wang Hung Chuan

˄ *Example: The foreground plant on the left is overgrown and pressed tightly to the glass.*

Photo by Marcin Kowalski

˄ *Example: There is only one foreground plant, and it stretches all the way across. This is another way to achieve a "runway" effect.*

˅ *Example: Only three species of plants are used in this 4-foot tank, and they are all given equal floorspace. They are also exactly parallel to the front glass.*

Photo by Pedro Miguel Gomes Silva Rosa

front left and right corners, similar to curtains on a theater stage.

- Curtain plants give tanks a sense of depth.

SECTION FOUR: EVERYTHING ELSE

This final section contains a random smorgasbord of ideas that don't really fit into previous sections or aquascaping themes.

- You can use a variety of plants, but tall *Hydrocotyle*, tall grasses like *Vallisneria*, tall *Cryptocoryne*, or even *Potamogeton* are used for this purpose.

7. CHOOSE THE COLOR OF THE SUBSTRATE CAREFULLY.

Traditional Dutch style tanks use inert natural brown gravel. Black blasting sand or dark clay soils like ADA Aquasoil are traditionally not used, but will not count against you in a contest unless you have large swaths of substrate exposed.

8. REMOVE ALGAE ALONG THE SUBSTRATE LINE.

This happens to the best of us. Traditional Dutch style tanks are expected to cover the substrate line with their homemade stands. If you choose not to cover it, you are opting for more work.

Creating a beautiful foreground that pulls the eye further into the tank is a delicate balancing act of plant selection and timely trimming. It's one of the many reasons that Dutch style aquascaping has had such appeal for so long.

1. USE AN AQUARIUM THAT IS AT LEAST 24" FRONT TO BACK.

Tanks with 18" or less front to back depth need extra focus on the

midground as well as a perfectly executed plant street to add a feeling of depth. A depth of 24" front to back is a nice place to start. Thirty inches from front to back is even better. However, if you have just 18" then you need to take a lesson from Nature Aquarium style and depth using a lot of midground groups and strongly tapering plant streets.

2. COVER ABOUT 80 TO 90% OF THE SUBSTRATE WITH PLANTS.

If you cram plants into every inch of the substrate, it looks suffocating. Too few plants and it looks unfinished. Find a happy medium.

3. A NATURE STYLE 'SCAPE WITH PLANT STREETS DOES NOT MAKE IT DUTCH.

No U-shaped plant layout (or upside down U), i.e. tall plants on either end with short plants in the middle. This

is a component of Nature Aquarium style pioneered by Takashi Amano. While incredibly beautiful, it is not Dutch. Even if your plant choices and color contrasts are typical of Dutch style, if you create a U-shaped scape, judges will ooh and aah, but eventually disqualify your entry.

Don't overuse driftwood. Likewise, avoid Iwagumi-style rock clusters or hardscaping. Dutch style is about plants!

4. IF YOU DO USE DRIFTWOOD, USE SMALL PIECES COVERED WITH MOSS TO SEPARATE SOMEWHAT SIMILAR GROUPS OF PLANTS.

Mosses provide much-needed dark green foliage in Dutch tanks, but don't do this as a separator tactic between too many groups. By the way, moss on a wall does not count toward species count, but moss on a log does.

Photo by José Antonio Jurado Rivera

5. YOU DON'T HAVE TO USE SUBSTRATE TO CREATE AN UPWARD SLOPE TOWARD THE BACK.

There is no need for terracing to elevate the substrate in the back of the tank. A slight incline to the back wall is fine but is not needed. Use the natural height of plants to imply elevation in the back.

6. WHAT ABOUT THE FISH?

A dozen or so fish of one main species is the minimum. Onesies and twosies of random fish lack the effect provided by a school. Avoid too many fish, as it makes a tank look busy and hectic. Stock lightly. I have and continue to make this mistake because I have nowhere else to put my Cardinal Tetras. Cardinal Tetras like to occupy the bottom third of the tank. If your tank has just Cardinals, the top layer will look empty. Time to add some top level swimmers. For the same reason, bottom level swimmers such as a few loaches or *Corydoras* or dwarf Cichlids add to the balance.

Photo by Gil Carini

∧ *Example: A lovely inverted U-shaped aquascape with rock clusters that is, sadly, not Dutch.*

∨ *Example: This aquascape feels a little oppressive because the plants are crammed together. That said, the plant health is outstanding.*

Photo by Pablo Fernandez

7. USE AN EARTHY OR BROWN *CRYPTOCORYNE* IN THE MIDGROUND SOMEWHERE.

It always feels like we have too many light green plants or we've gone overboard on red ones. Dark greens, dark olive, and earthy browns are sorely lacking in Dutch tanks. *Cryptocoryne beckettii*, *C. albida* 'brown', *C. undulata*, several forms of *C. wendtii* or even the relatively uncommon *Lagenandra keralensis* could work.

8. DON'T MAKE BACKGROUND PLANT BUSHES OF THE SAME WIDTH AND HEIGHT.

If you have a 4-foot long tank, it'd be very easy to place 5 bushes in the background, each about 8 to 10 inches wide. This sameness will look staged and reduce contrast.

∧ *Example: Cryptocoryne wendtii 'brown' makes a nice contrast in a sea of green.*

Photo by Scott Miller

∧ *Example: A Dutch aquascape with a good selection of mid-and bottom-swimming fish.*

∨ *Example: The bushes in the background are all nearly the same width.*

Photo by Gabor Vereb

9. DON'T OVER-TRIM ONE SIDE OF THE TANK.

It will make the other side seem too heavy. The bigger your tank (and busier your schedule), the more likely this issue will occur. If you're nearing photography for competition, expect to spend an hour a day for a couple of weeks. Follow every major trim with a large water change.

10. REMOVE THE HARDWARE BEFORE TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS FOR (ANY) CONTEST.

Not doing so will cost you points. Remove the filter hardware, heater, drop checker, etc.

11. FERTILIZING YOUR DUTCH TANK

As mentioned on Page 1, this guide is aimed at entry-level American aquascapers.

Estimative Index (EI) is a fertilizing technique that's popular in the US. It aims to provide nutrients and CO_2 in excess, so you no longer have to worry about deficiencies.

While EI is a very effective horticulture tactic, it is excessive with both fertilizer and CO_2. Such levels of fertilizer and CO_2 will cause many plants to grow at unsustainable speeds. This might sound like a good thing, but it does two things:

First, the plants grow so quickly that you will need to constantly uproot and trim. The issue with this is the tank will always look freshly planted, like you just set up the tank a week ago.

Second, it's very difficult to project a calm and restful appearance when plants are growing at breakneck speeds. EI-dosed Dutch tanks often look hurried and restless. Leaf size, color, and growth patterns...all looked 'cranked up to 11.'

Expert Dutch scapers in Holland don't use anywhere near as much water column dosing. Most of them would gasp at how much nutrients and CO_2 are added to American tanks. Think of EI as a blunt farming technique. It's not ideal for Dutch style tanks. Our Iwagumi and Nature Aquarium friends will attest to this.

My suggestion is to dose half or one-third strength EI with moderate levels of CO_2 and light. If you have hungry plants, you can always insert fertilizer tablets deep into the substrate under those plants.

I hope this has inspired you to try this beautiful and challenging style of aquascaping.

If you combine all the tips shared in this series, it'll become clear that Dutch style 'scaping is the most horticulture-intensive of all aquascaping styles. This style will force you to learn the needs of each species.

In the early 1990s, just before Takashi Amano entered the scene, Dutch 'scapes were dominated by about 20 species of plants. Virtually all the top tanks contained some assortment of these 20 plants. There's a reason for this: everyone knew the needs and growth patterns of these 20 plants and armed with that knowledge they could create an endless variety of spectacular tanks.

Choosing plants is harder today because of the sheer variety available. You need to be ruthless in your plant selection. If a *Rotala* or *Ammannia* stunt in your tank, move onto something you can grow without issues. Select a dozen that you can grow really well and get going!

POSTSCRIPT BY JOE HARVEY

Vin is a longtime friend and he asked me to write a postscript for this excellent guide showing a few mistakes that I'd made with early contest entries, and what I did to correct them in later ones.

I then had the sobering realization that in four years I really haven't fixed anything!

My entries all have the same basic mistakes or weaknesses. And I tend to repeat them.

When you see a good Dutch tank in pictures it looks almost 3D. There is a profound sense of depth that comes across even in photograph. To create this feeling of depth using only plants is the ultimate goal and also the biggest challenge when it comes to making a good Dutch tank.

Two basic ingredients you need to begin with are big full groups, and dramatic contrasts in height. My entries have typically lacked good use of the former, and therefore lack the kind of depth and fullness a good Dutch tank is supposed to have.

On the following page, I've marked a few weak spots in my 2020 AGA entry. In spite of placing second, this tank has some big problems. And for the most part the problems all come down to just needing bigger/fuller groups.

Top left: This group needs at least twice as many stems to fill the space nicely. Adding another row or two down low would also kill the big shadow above the *balsamica*.

Bottom left corner: again, it needs about 3x as many stems, and it needs to be taller to create better depth. Ideally, the *balsamica* would disappear behind it at the very bottom.

Mid bottom: *Hyptis laciniata* here isn't too bad but having a few more would help. Could fill in the big shadow and create more of a well-contoured mound.

Bottom right corner: Species choice aside, this group needs to span further to the right and add a couple inches of height all the way around. However! Gotta be careful not to mirror the opposite corner. Im already using small stems in both spots so there needs to be a distinct difference in the size and general direction of the two groups. See Case Study above.

Top right corner: Using big-leaved species where you need a solid block of color can be risky. If you don't have enough stems the group looks hollow, you can see through it. *Staurogyne spatulata* is a versatile plant, works well either short or tall, makes a great street. But to work in this particular spot there needed to be a lot more of it.

Mid back: Speaking of big leaved species and hollowness, *Ludwigia* sp. *rubin* here needs a couple dozen more stems to really look right. It's not a great choice to begin with, especially with the similar sized *spatulata* beside it. A fat *rotala* bush or any fine leaved red would've looked better.

Red X: *Blyxa octandra* was a poor choice for this secondary focal spot. For one thing the plant itself is a little ratty looking and you never want that. Second, its natural shape blocks light from hitting the front of it, which makes the whole thing look dark and shadowed. Literally the opposite of what I was going for! A bright species in front of it would've helped. Better still would be moving it to the right and just doing something else in the focal spot.

If you can imagine all these spots having fuller groups you can see what a difference it would've made. It would've turned a tank that right now merely qualifies as a Dutch into a pretty good one.

So, that is the main thing I'm trying to improve on these days, incorporating bigger groups across the board for better fullness and depth.

Vin already covered the importance of height contrasts with some good examples. I used to think of height contrast as just another rule to follow. Don't have anything that's the same height as another group. It's actually a primary tool for expression and must be utilized. It's key even for foreground plants - just because they are foreground plants, does not mean they can all be the same height.

Height difference forms the bedrock of a Dutch scape. It defines the the overall shape and "where things go" visually. It's what creates depth. Think of height contrasts as part of the structure itself.

Colors are just the final coat of paint - I cannot stress this enough.

So, pay extra close attention to height and leaf shape before you think about color. (Pro-tip: take a black & white picture of your tank and see if there is contrast without color). Paying too much attention to color contrast instead of height and leaf shape contrast is one of the most common mistakes I see beginners make.

Photo by Joe Harvey

∧ *Joe Harvey's 2020 entry in the Dutch category.*

∨ *The same image with areas of design weaknesses (see postscript).*

Photo & markup by Joe Harvey

Alexandru Lucian Caileanu

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