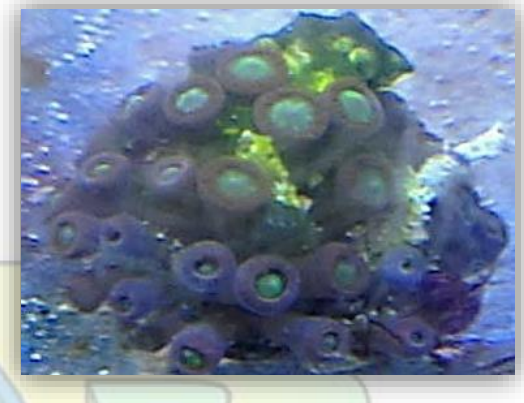
The Green Zoa
Zoanthus sp.

By John Moyles



Zoanthus sp. are among the easiest corals to keep. They are an excellent choice a first coral for new hobbyists, and highly recommended for beginners.

The *Zoanthus* genus was described by Cuvier in 1800. There are about two dozen species in this genus. These include some Atlantic Ocean species such as *Z. pullchellus* and *Z solanderi*, some Pacific Ocean species such as *Z. coppingeri*, *Z. mantoni*, and *Z. vietnamensis*, and the *Zoanthus* found in both oceans like *Z. pacificus* and *Z. sociatus*.

The *zoanthus* genus is one of many types of polyps that the term, "zoanthid" is used for. The term "zoanthid" refers to the order and is a very large group that zoanthus is a member of. Common names for this particular genus include Zoas, Zoanthids, Sea Mat, Zoanthid Button Polyps, Green Button Polyps, Green Sea Mat, and Button Polyps.

Description

Zoanthus sp. have soft bodies covered with a leathery skin, called the cuticle, which gives them protection. The polyps themselves are not usually larger than 1/2" and have short stalks topped with a small flat oral disc. Delicate tentacles ring the outside of the oral disc and are usually expanded day and night. The oral disk has a mouth, called a siphonoglyph, in the center that leads into their stomach cavity. Individual polyps can be connected to each other and they primarily grow as mats called coenenchyme. However their mats do not incorporate sand or sediment in the coenenchyme, as other species of Zoanthid can. This variety is a pleasant mint green color ringed by handsome mocha brown tentacles. Keeping them under a largely actinic lighting makes them appear to glow in the dark.

Difficulty

The *Zoanthus* genus is easy to care for as long as they have adequate lighting and good water flow. They are a recommended beginner's coral. Be cautious of filamentous algae as it can overgrow and smother polyps. There is a snail called the Box Snail or Sundial Snail *Heliacus areola* that prey on Zoanthid colonies, so must be removed if seen.

Compatibility

The *Zoanthus* genus will get along with itself, but they need to be placed in an area where they will not encroach on nearby corals. They will only bother corals that are too close. They are as toxic as the corals in the *Palythoa* or *Protopalythoa* genus, but can simply smother corals by growing over them.

Zoanthus are not a predatory species. They can be kept in the company of small coral reef fish and shrimp. Good tank mates include small tangs, blennies, tilefish, sword gobies, damselfish, and dottybacks. Avoid large crustaceans and biofilm (aufwuchs) feeders, such as large angelfish and most butterflyfish, that like to nibble on their tentacles.

Aquarium Conditions

A typical live rock/reef environment is what is needed for your *Zoanthu*s, along with some fish for organic matter production. Stable tank conditions are needed to keep the *Zoanthus* genus. Doing water changes of 20% a month or 10% biweekly is needed, although it is suggested that doing 5% water changes once a week will replenish many of the needed additives. Make sure iodine is present, and also the addition of trace elements may help with *Zoanthu* survival and growth. Provide proper lighting and water movement. Moderate water flow and a strong light source are required for *Zoanthu* to do well.

Propagation

Propagation is relatively easy for *Zoanthus* corals, just cut the mat or chip away under the polyp's grip. Dry the bottom of the mat or debris that the polyp is stuck to, and the rock or plug you will be putting it on. Then use super glue (the gel is the best) to connect them. Wait a few seconds for it to set and then put the new frag back into the water. Another method that can be used is to rubber band them to a rock or desired surface. By the time the rubber band breaks away, the polyp will have connected. It is best to dip both the mother colony and the new frag in a coral dip. There are many varieties on the market, make sure to follow the manufacturer's directions. This dip will help ward off bacteria, fungus, and protozoans.

Palytoxin

The members of the Zoanthidae family have varying degrees of poison called palytoxin. All of the *Palythoa* genus and most *Protopalythoa* genus produce a high level of this poison in their mucus and gonads. Other genera, such as the *Zoanthus* genus, have it to a lesser extent, and so a less dangerous degree.

To be affected by this toxin, it must either be ingested or must enter the bloodstream. It can enter the system through an open wound. It has been suggested by some that it may also be absorbed through skin contact though this is not confirmed.

The danger to the aquarist is minimal with proper precautions. If you have a cut on your hand, this poison can get into your system, but in average aquarium keeping it is unlikely to pose any danger beyond a localized skin reaction. Some hobbyists wear gloves when handling these organisms.