

Asterina Starfish – Friend or Foe?

By John Moyles

Asterina starfish are one of those creatures that just show up in a reef tank. They hitchhike in on corals, plants or live rock and can reach populations of plague proportions if conditions are right. Some people say that they are a menace that will eat corals while others believe that they are a beneficial detritivore and should be left alone. Can they both be right? I think so. There is very little information out there one way or the other, the best answer I could come up with is that there are many different species of asterina starfish and some might eat corals and others might eat detritus. If you start noticing jagged white marks on your corals, particularly on the base, you might want to consider purging them from your system.



If you choose to eliminate them, it can be problematic since they are so small ($\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch) and reproduce by fissiparous reproduction. That means that if you cut off a starfish's leg, the leg will grow a new starfish. Manual removal is almost impossible. One method is to add a harlequin shrimp, they are obligate starfish predators and do not do well without a constant supply of tube feet to dine on. A pair will quickly reduce the numbers so fast that they will often starve within a month and should be either rehomed or a source of feeder starfish should be established.

The best bet is prevention by always quarantining new additions to your tank so as not to have any unwelcome guests.