

Red Cherry Shrimp - care guide

Neocaridina davidi

The best starting point in the hobby: hardy, prolific, forgiving of ordinary tap water, and genuinely striking in a planted tank. If you have never kept shrimp before, keep these first.

At a glance

Difficulty: Beginner

Adult size: 2-3cm

Lifespan: 1-2 years

Water parameters

Temperature: 20-24°C

pH: 6.8-7.6

GH: 6-12

KH: 2-8

TDS: 150-250

These are the ranges to aim for, not the extremes they can survive. Shrimp are far more sensitive to sudden change than to imperfect conditions - stability matters more than hitting an exact number.

Keeping them

Red Cherry Shrimp are the reason most people end up keeping shrimp at all. They tolerate a wide band of ordinary tap-water conditions, breed readily without intervention, and a mature colony grazing across a planted tank is one of the more absorbing things in the hobby.

The single most important thing to understand: shrimp are far more sensitive to sudden change than to imperfect conditions. A colony will thrive at a steady pH 7.4 and 200 TDS. The same colony will die at a "better" pH 7.0 if you get there in an afternoon. Stability beats optimality every time, and almost every beginner loss traces back to that rather than to the numbers themselves.

A 20-litre tank will comfortably hold a starter colony of 10-15, and they will multiply from there. Cycle it fully before they arrive - shrimp are considerably less tolerant of ammonia than the fish most people cycle tanks for.

Filtration should be gentle and sponge-based. A hang-on-back or canister intake will eventually take shrimplets into the impeller; if you use one, cover it properly rather than hoping.

Water

Neocaridina are the least fussy dwarf shrimp in the hobby, but "least fussy" is not "indifferent".

GH is what actually matters. Shrimp need general hardness to moult properly - this is a calcium and magnesium requirement, not a preference. Below about GH 4 you will start losing shrimp to failed moults, which look like sudden unexplained deaths in an otherwise healthy tank. Most UK tap water in hard-water areas is comfortably in range; soft-water areas (much of Scotland, Wales, the South West) will need remineralising.

KH buys you stability. It is the buffer that stops pH swinging when something decomposes. KH 0 tanks are for Caridina keepers who know exactly what they are doing; here, keep some.

Acclimatise slowly. Drip acclimatise over 2-3 hours on arrival. This is not optional advice for live animals that have spent a day in a bag - it is the difference between a good order and a dead one, and it is the single most common cause of arrival losses that get blamed on the seller.

Never use copper-based medications or plant fertilisers high in copper. Copper is lethal to invertebrates at

concentrations fish do not notice.

Feeding

Neocaridina are grazers and spend most of their day working over surfaces for biofilm - the invisible layer of microorganisms that coats everything in a mature tank. In an established, planted tank, that biofilm does most of the feeding for you.

Supplement rather than replace it. A small amount of a purpose-made shrimp food two or three times a week is plenty for a colony of twenty. Overfeeding is the most common avoidable mistake: uneaten food fouls the water, drives planaria and hydra blooms, and produces the ammonia spike that kills the colony.

Blanched vegetables go down extremely well - courgette, spinach and nettle in particular. Blanch briefly, let it sink, and remove anything left after a few hours.

Feed sparingly, and use the shrimp as your gauge: a colony that swarms food instantly is hungry, one that ignores it is already well fed on biofilm.

Telling males from females

Straightforward once they're grown, and near-impossible before that. Don't try to sex anything under about three months old - juveniles of both sexes look like small females, and every "all male" batch anyone has ever complained about was really a batch of juveniles.

The saddle is the first thing to appear. A yellowish or greenish patch on the back just behind the head, roughly saddle-shaped, visible through the shell. Those are her developing ovaries, and only females have them. It shows well before any difference in body shape does, which makes it the most useful marker on young stock.

Then the belly. An adult female's abdomen curves down deeply - the side plates of each segment are expanded into a brood chamber for carrying eggs. A male's underside runs almost straight. Held side by side this is unmistakable; on a single animal it takes some familiarity.

Size and colour follow. Females are noticeably larger at maturity and usually more intensely coloured. Neither is reliable alone - a well-fed male can outgrow an underfed female, and colour varies with grade and stress - but together with the two markers above they settle it.

A berried female is obviously female, but by then you already knew.

For a mixed colony, a rough rule: buy ten or more and you will get both sexes with near-certainty. Buying "a pair" of dwarf shrimp is not really a thing anyone can sell you honestly.

Breeding

You do not need to do anything to breed Red Cherry Shrimp except keep them alive and unstressed. If conditions are right, they will breed; if they are not breeding, treat that as a water-quality readout rather than a breeding problem.

A female carrying eggs is described as "berried" - the eggs are visible as a cluster under her tail, which she will fan constantly to keep oxygenated. Expect roughly 20-30 eggs per clutch, hatching in about three to four weeks depending on temperature.

There is no larval stage. Neocaridina hatch as fully formed miniature adults and are immediately independent - no separate rearing tank, no specialised food. This is what makes them so much easier than Amano Shrimp, which cannot complete their life cycle in fresh water at all.

Shrimplets are extremely vulnerable for their first two weeks. Moss, leaf litter and dense planting matter more here than anything else you can do.

Warmer water accelerates breeding, and shortens lives. A colony kept at 26-27°C will produce faster and burn out sooner than one at 21-22°C.

Tank mates

Neocaridina are prey animals and behave like it. They do best either in a species-only tank or with fish too small and too peaceful to treat them as food.

Safe: otocinclus, pygmy corydoras, ember tetras, chili rasboras, nerite and ramshorn snails, and other dwarf shrimp of the same genus.

Risky: most tetras and rasboras above about 4cm will take shrimplets even if they leave adults alone. You will keep a colony, but you will rarely see it grow.

Not safe: angelfish, gouramis, cichlids of any size, bettas (individual temperament varies, but the odds are poor), loaches, and anything described as a "community fish" that reaches 8cm or more.

A heavily planted tank changes these odds considerably - moss, floating plants and leaf litter give shrimplets somewhere to be invisible for the two weeks that matter most.

Common problems

Sudden deaths after a water change. Almost always a parameter swing rather than the water itself. Change less, more often - 10% weekly beats 40% monthly - and match temperature and TDS as closely as you can.

Deaths at moulting, or a "white ring of death". A distinct white band across the shrimp's midsection where the shell failed to part cleanly. This is a GH or calcium problem, or a symptom of an over-rapid water change. Check GH first.

Loss of colour. Usually stress, sometimes diet, occasionally genetics reasserting themselves. Newly arrived shrimp often go pale for a day or two and colour back up as they settle - this is normal and not a sign of a bad seller.

Colony stops breeding. Check temperature, then check for anything copper-bearing that has entered the tank. Fertilisers and fish medications are the usual culprits.

Planaria or hydra appearing. Both indicate overfeeding rather than bad luck. Cut back feeding first; treat second, and only with an invertebrate-safe product - most planaria treatments are lethal to shrimp.

Grades & buying

Cherry Shrimp are graded on the depth, opacity and coverage of their red, and the terminology is not standardised across sellers - which is exactly why it is worth understanding rather than trusting.

Roughly, in ascending order: Cherry (patchy, translucent red), Sakura (denser, some clear patches), Fire Red (solid opaque red across the body), Painted Fire Red (solid red including legs and rostrum, no translucency at all).

Higher grades cost more because they are harder to produce and hold: red is polygenic, and a colony left alone will drift back toward wild-type brown over generations unless the keeper culls consistently. A high grade is a claim about the breeder's work, not just the animal.

Two practical consequences when buying. First, grade names are seller-defined, so photographs of the actual animals matter far more than the label. Second, if you want to keep a high grade high, do not mix grades in one tank - they interbreed freely and the offspring regress toward the mean.

In the wild

Neocaridina davidi is native to eastern Asia - Taiwan, southern and eastern China, Korea and northern Vietnam - where it lives in slow-moving streams, ponds and irrigation channels, usually among dense vegetation, leaf litter and submerged roots.

Wild animals are not red. They are a mottled, translucent brown-green, which is excellent camouflage on a silty streambed and completely unremarkable to look at. Every coloured Neocaridina in the hobby is the product of selective breeding from that wild-type stock, which is also why a mixed colony drifts back toward brown within a few generations.

Their wild habitat is instructive for keeping them. These are hard-water animals: the streams they come from run over mineral-rich substrate, which is why GH matters so much and why soft-water areas need

remineralising. They're also temperate, not tropical - the range extends well north, and populations survive seasonal cold. That's the reason they do fine at room temperature and shorten their lives at 26°C, which is the single most common mistake made with them.

They've established feral populations in several countries including Germany, Poland and parts of the United States, usually downstream of aquarium releases or warm-water outflows. Worth stating plainly: never release aquarium shrimp into UK waterways. It's illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, and Neocaridina are demonstrably capable of establishing.

How it reached the hobby

The taxonomy has been messy, and older sources use names that have since changed. The species was described as **Neocaridina davidi** (Bouvier, 1904), but for years the hobby knew it as **N. heteropoda** or **N. denticulata sinensis** - those are now treated as synonyms. If you read an older care sheet under a different name, it's probably this animal.

The red line - "Red Cherry" - is generally credited to Taiwanese breeders in the 1990s, selectively bred from wild-type stock over successive generations. It reached the European hobby around the turn of the millennium and the wider English-speaking hobby in the early 2000s, where it rapidly became the default beginner shrimp for the obvious reason: it breeds in tap water and looks like a jewel.

Higher grades came later and largely from the same approach applied harder - Sakura, then Fire Red, then Painted Fire Red, each representing more consistent, more opaque coverage achieved by culling more aggressively. Blue, yellow, green, orange and black lines followed through the 2000s and 2010s, all from the same species.

The honest caveat: precise attribution for most Neocaridina colour lines is not well documented. Individual breeders are named in forum posts and shop copy, often inconsistently, and the hobby's record-keeping was informal at the time. The Taiwanese origin of the red line and the rough timeline are widely accepted; specific names attached to specific lines should be treated with more caution than they usually are.

Care advice is general guidance - if something in your tank disagrees with this guide, trust your own water tests. Read the latest version at shrimpbay.shop/species/red-cherry-shrimp