Tadpole Care

Raising a dart from egg to tadpole to froglet is a fun and rewarding experience. Many can find this a daunting proposition but with a few simple steps this process is extremely easy. Here's how we do it:

Supplies:

- Container
- Spring water or water conditioner
- Cattapa/Indian Almond Leaves
- Aspirator or turkey baster
- Aquatic moss
- Food

Container

Setting up a container for dart frog tadpoles is rather easy. Anything that can hold a small volume of water works. I personally like using 2-4oz deli cups for Ranitomeya tadpoles and 8-32oz deli containers for all other species. Each tadpole should have its own individual cup to prevent cannabilism and a lid is recommended to prevent escapes as the tadpoles metamorphosize.

A few species can be kept communally. I prefer to raise all my Dendrobates communally. When doing this a larger container is necessary. I prefer 2 ½ - 5 gallon aquariums or a 6-12 quart tub. Providing ample cover with leaves, driftwood and moss is necessary as well as providing enough food that the tadpoles don't turn on each other. Filtration is not needed with regular water changes but I have found a sponge filter to be a welcome addition as the tadpoles can often be seen foraging on the sponge's surface. Anecdotally it seems that tadpoles raised communally grow out to be larger, stranger metamorphs.

Water

It is best to use spring water with your tadpoles but if you are fortunate enough to have good quality tap water a simple water conditioner to remove chlorine/chloramine can be used. Or tap water can be left out in an open vessel for 24 hours.

Once your water is ready it can be added to your container. I find it best to start off with a low amount of water and gradually increase the volume each week during water changes. This can vary depending on the size of your container.

Leaves, Moss & Tadpole Tea

Adding a small leaf or piece of a larger leaf can be beneficial. Leaves release tannins into the water which in turn raise the pH, add antioxidants and supply some antimicrobial properties. Leaves are also used as cover by the tadpoles and an additional food source through the biofilm that will develop on the leaves. The most suitable leaves are Cattapa aka Indian Almond Leaves. Oak leaves can also be used.

Aquatic mosses can also be added. Just like leaves, the moss will provide a few benefits. Moss will help keep the water clean through nutrient uptake and it will also provide supplemental food for the tadpole

Some people will opt for using tadpole tea for their water. To make tadpole tea you will boil a handful of Indian Almond Leaves, preferably in spring water. Allow the water to cool. Then strain it into a container and use it for your water changes. The water should be a tan or brown hue, like a a cup of tea.

Upkeep

Tadpoles are growing and like any growing creature need a steady supply of food. Feeding every 1-2 days is best. Only feed a small amount of food so as not to dirty the water. Remove uneaten food the following day. Food sources can consist of many different things, but I have had the most success with Repashy Soilent Green and Fluval Bug Bites Color Enhancing Granules used in rotation. These two food sources provide plenty of protein through insect meals, algae like spirulina and ample carotenoids needed for development. There are also commercially available foods specifically designed for dart frog tadpoles.

With all the feeding and eating comes waste. Tadpoles are dirty little creatures and at least one weekly cleaning of their container is needed. A 10-25% water change is needed. Using a turkey baster or aspirator you can suck up uneaten food and waste and dispose of it (house plants love it!) Top off the water with your water source or tadpole tea and the tadpoles are all set. At this time you can add more bits of leaf or moss as needed.

Continue feeding and cleaning and in a few weeks your tadpole should begin its metamorphosis from water to land.

The Metamorph

Dart frog tadpoles typically take 6-8 weeks from hatching to becoming a full fledged froglet. Tadpoles will quickly grow, doubling in size almost weekly until you start to notice little nubs on either side of the base of its tail. These are the back legs beginning to grow. As the back legs fully form two pouches can be seen on either side of the tadpole's head. The front arms will develop in these pouches and will emerge fully grown. At this time you should begin seeing the first glimpses of pattern and color on your tadpole. You should continue feeding and carrying for your tadpole as you did before but once the front legs 'pop' your tadpole (now metamorph) will likely stop eating. This is because they are beginning to absorb their tail and become a full-fledged frog.

At this time you should reduce your water volume and provide a place for your tadpole to emerge from the water. Drowning is a real risk at this stage. Depending on your container your 'land' area can vary. With larger deli cups you can tilt the cup to provide a slope where there is just a small amount of water in the bottom. In smaller cups I will often provide a few small rocks or piece of filter foam, or I will use saucers to create small ponds in the froglet grow out enclosure that the tadpoles can be placed in. For communal setups I like to provide either a piece of driftwood that rises out of the water or dock/hammock you would use for either betta fish or small aquatic turtles. Once your metamorph has absorbed most or all of its tail it is ready for its grow out enclosure.