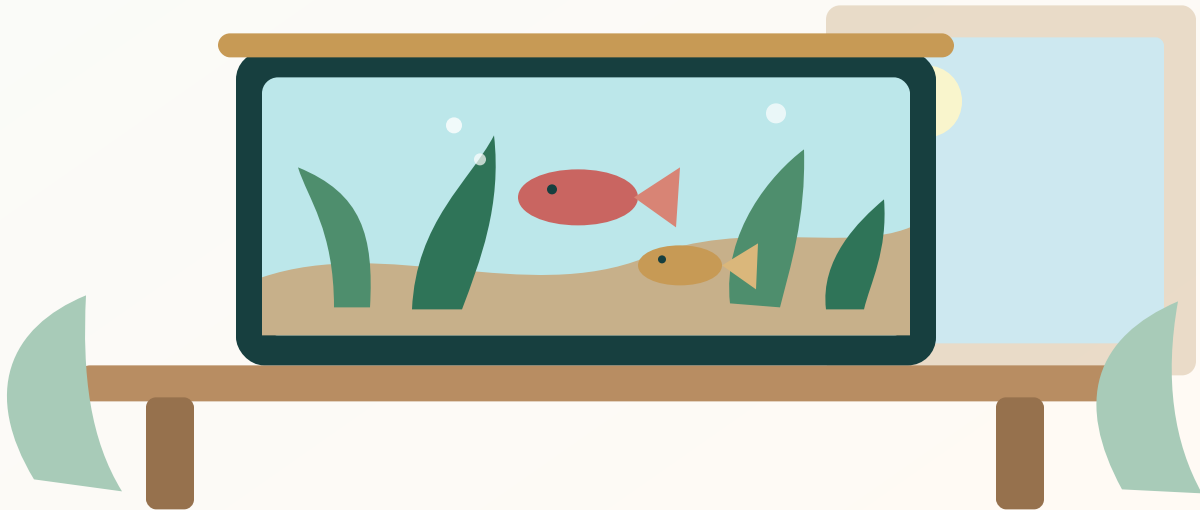


The Calm Aquarium Starter Kit

A step-by-step beginner manual for setting up a safe freshwater aquarium, cycling it properly, adding fish slowly, and catching problems before they become emergencies.



INSIDE THIS KIT

Planning checklist • Equipment list • Setup-day steps • Fishless cycling guide • 30-day water log • First-week care • Weekly maintenance • Problem-solving flowchart



Full online checklist

Start simple. Move slowly.

A beginner aquarium becomes much easier when you stop trying to do everything in one day. Use this guide in order, write down your results, and give the tank time to settle before adding more fish or changing several things at once.

The PetYeti calm rule

Check first. Change one thing. Give the aquarium time.

Clear water does not always mean safe water. When something feels off, test the water and check temperature and equipment before reaching for medication or doing a full cleanout.

This guide is for

- ☐ Freshwater beginner aquariums
- ☐ Betta and small community tanks
- ☐ Planted or lightly planted setups
- ☐ Real homes, apartments, desks, and bedrooms

Your first five priorities



Right-size the tank

Choose for the adult size, activity, and social needs of the fish - not just how small they look in the store.



Protect the water

Condition tap water, cycle the filter, test regularly, and keep ammonia and nitrite at zero.



Keep temperature stable

Use a thermometer and a species-appropriate heater when needed. Stability matters more than chasing a perfect number.



Stock slowly

Choose compatible fish and add them gradually so the filter and water quality can keep up.



Build a routine

A few minutes of observation each day prevents many bigger problems later.

Important

This kit does not replace species-specific care or veterinary advice. Research every fish before buying. Seek an aquatic veterinarian or experienced professional when a fish is severely distressed, injured, or getting worse.

1 Plan before you shop

A calm setup starts with a few decisions made before the tank comes home.

My tank plan

Tank size: _____
 Tank location: _____
 Fish or invertebrates I am considering: _____
 Adult size: _____
 Target temperature: _____
 Preferred water hardness/pH: _____
 Social needs: alone / pair / group of _____

Location check

- ☐ Strong, level furniture rated for the full tank weight
- ☐ Close to power, but cords can form a drip loop
- ☐ Away from direct sun, radiators, AC vents, and drafts
- ☐ Away from speakers, slamming doors, sprays, and smoke
- ☐ Enough room behind the tank for filter and cables
- ☐ Easy access for buckets, testing, and water changes

Research the fish, not just the tank

ADULT SIZE

How big will it really get?

Many store fish are juveniles. Plan for adult size, swimming space, and waste production.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Alone, pair, or school?

Some fish need groups; others defend territory. "Peaceful" does not automatically mean compatible.

WATER NEEDS

Can your tap water work?

Choose species that fit your temperature, hardness, and pH where possible. Stable water is easier than constantly adjusting it.

Budget for the whole setup. The tank is only one part. Include the filter, heater if needed, thermometer, water conditioner, test kit, lid, light, substrate, food, and basic maintenance tools.

Before-you-buy checklist

- ☐ I know the adult size of every fish I want.
- ☐ I checked temperature, hardness, and pH needs.
- ☐ The tank is large enough for the final stocking plan.
- ☐ I have a safe plan for vacations and power outages.
- ☐ I know whether each species should live alone or in a group.
- ☐ I checked compatibility, not just appearance.
- ☐ I have a realistic weekly maintenance plan.
- ☐ I will not buy fish until the tank is cycled.

2

Gather the gear that actually matters

Skip the clutter. These are the basics that protect water quality, temperature, and everyday care.

Essential equipment

- ☐ **Tank and level stand** sized for the adult fish and full setup weight
- ☐ **Lid or cover** if your species can jump or evaporation is an issue
- ☐ **Filter** with room for biological media
- ☐ **Heater** when the species needs warmer, stable water
- ☐ **Separate thermometer** to confirm the actual temperature
- ☐ **Water conditioner** for chlorine/chloramine
- ☐ **Water test kit** for ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, and pH
- ☐ **Light and timer** for a consistent day/night rhythm

Maintenance tools

- ☐ Dedicated bucket used only for the aquarium
- ☐ Gravel vacuum or siphon
- ☐ Algae pad safe for aquarium glass or acrylic
- ☐ Small net appropriate for the fish
- ☐ Clean towel for drips and maintenance
- ☐ Fish food matched to the species and mouth size
- ☐ Notebook or this kit for water-test records
- ☐ Power strip placed safely above floor level

Helpful, but not always necessary

Air pump + air stone

Useful when surface movement is weak, oxygen demand is high, or you run a sponge filter. Not every aquarium needs extra bubbles.

Live plants

They add cover and use some nutrients, but they do not replace cycling, filtration, testing, or water changes.

Starter bacteria

May help establish the filter when used correctly. You still need to test and confirm the cycle before adding fish.

Skip these beginner traps: tiny decorative bowls, unfiltered "starter" containers, mystery chemicals that promise instant perfection, replacing all filter media at once, and buying fish before you know their adult needs.

Buy the simplest reliable equipment that solves a real problem in your tank. You do not need the most expensive setup. You do need a dependable filter, stable temperature, conditioned water, and a way to test what you cannot see.

3 Set up the tank in the right order

A steady setup day saves you from draining the tank to fix something later.

- 1 **Level the stand**
Check the floor and stand before the tank is filled. Never try to move a full aquarium.
- 2 **Rinse with plain water**
Rinse the empty tank, substrate, rocks, and decorations. Do not use soap or household cleaners.
- 3 **Add substrate and hardscape**
Place heavy rocks securely. Leave open swimming space and avoid sharp edges.
- 4 **Install equipment**
Fit the filter, heater, thermometer, and air line before filling. Do not power them yet.
- 5 **Fill gently**
Pour water onto a plate or plastic bag so the substrate stays in place.
- 6 **Condition the water**
Treat tap water for chlorine/chloramine according to the conditioner label.
- 7 **Start filter and heater**
Prime the filter if needed. Make sure water is moving and the heater is fully submerged as directed.
- 8 **Set the light timer**
Begin with a modest, consistent light period. Avoid direct sunlight.
- 9 **Add plants**
Place tall plants at the back, shorter plants toward the front, and leave access for cleaning.
- 10 **Check for leaks and flow**
Watch every seam, hose, and filter connection for several hours.
- 11 **Record your baseline**
Write down temperature, pH, and tap-water readings before cycling starts.
- 12 **Begin a fishless cycle**
Do not add fish yet. The filter needs time to grow bacteria that process waste.

Setup-day record

Date started: _____
 Tank volume: _____
 Filter model/type: _____

Temperature: _____
 Tap-water pH: _____
 Cycling method: _____

4 Cycle the aquarium before adding fish

Cycling grows the bacteria that turn toxic fish waste into safer compounds the tank can manage.



A calm fishless-cycling routine

- 1 **Choose one fishless-cycling method.** Use aquarium-safe ammonia or a maturation product exactly as directed. A bacterial starter or disease-free mature filter media may help seed the filter, but you still need an ammonia source, regular testing, and proof that ammonia and nitrite return to zero.
- 2 **Keep the filter running 24/7.** The bacteria live mainly on wet surfaces and inside the filter media.
- 3 **Test consistently.** Track ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH, and temperature.
- 4 **Wait for the pattern.** Ammonia and nitrite rise, then return to zero as the bacterial colonies develop.
- 5 **Do not rush day 30.** Some tanks need longer. Keep logging until the cycle is genuinely stable.

What “ready” looks like

- ☐ Ammonia is consistently 0 ppm
- ☐ Nitrite is consistently 0 ppm
- ☐ Nitrate is present or otherwise accounted for
- ☐ Temperature is stable and species-appropriate
- ☐ pH is stable and appropriate for the planned fish
- ☐ Filter flow is steady and equipment is working

Do not replace all filter media. That can remove much of the beneficial bacteria you just spent weeks growing. Rinse reusable media gently in removed tank water when flow slows.

PetYeti tip: Take a photo of every water test beside the date. Color charts can be hard to remember later, and a photo makes trends easier to compare.

Cycle log: Days 1-15

Test on the schedule recommended for your chosen cycling method. If you skip a day, simply continue - the goal is a useful trend, not a perfect notebook.

Ammonia Nitrite Nitrate pH / temperature

Day	Date	Ammonia ppm	Nitrite ppm	Nitrate ppm	pH	Temp	What I added / changed
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
12							
13							
14							
15							

What to notice

Do readings move in a clear direction? Is temperature steady? Did pH change sharply? Write down anything that could explain a change, such as a dose, water change, added media, or equipment adjustment.

When to pause

If equipment fails, the tank leaks, or pH/temperature swings sharply, fix the stability problem before continuing the cycling routine.

Cycle log: Days 16-30

A calendar does not cycle a tank - bacteria do. Continue beyond day 30 if ammonia or nitrite are not consistently zero.

Day	Date	Ammonia ppm	Nitrite ppm	Nitrate ppm	pH	Temp	What I added / changed
16							
17							
18							
19							
20							
21							
22							
23							
24							
25							
26							
27							
28							
29							
30							

Ready-for-fish checkpoint

- ☐ Ammonia is 0 ppm
 ☐ Nitrite is 0 ppm
 ☐ Results are stable across repeated tests
- ☐ Temperature and pH are stable
 ☐ Filter and heater have run reliably
 ☐ I have a species-appropriate stocking plan

Still unsure? Take a water sample and your written results to a reputable aquarium store, experienced keeper, or aquatic veterinarian before buying fish.

5

Choose and add fish slowly

The tank may be cycled, but the aquarium still needs time to adjust to real fish waste and a new social group.

Choose healthy fish

- ☐ Clear eyes and intact fins and scales
- ☐ Steady breathing and normal swimming
- ☐ No white spots, fuzzy growth, open sores, or swelling
- ☐ Interested in food when appropriate
- ☐ No sick or dead fish sharing the store tank

Stocking check

- ☐ Adult size fits the aquarium
- ☐ Temperature and water needs match
- ☐ Group size or solitary needs are respected
- ☐ Temperament matches current tankmates
- ☐ The filter can handle the planned addition

A gentle arrival routine

Before leaving the store

Ask about the store water, feeding routine, and any recent illness. Keep transport time short and the bag protected from temperature swings.

At home

Dim the room and switch off the aquarium light. Follow the seller's acclimation guidance for the species and transport method.

Transfer

Move fish gently. Avoid pouring store water into the aquarium where practical. Do not chase fish around the bag or tank.

First evening

Keep lights low, avoid tapping the glass, and feed lightly or wait until the next routine feeding if advised.

Avoid filling the entire stocking plan in one trip. Add a sensible first group, watch the water and behavior, and give the filter time to respond before the next addition.

New-fish record

Species: _____

Number added: _____

Date added: _____

Store/source: _____

The first 7 days: watch, test, and stay calm

New fish may hide, eat less, or explore cautiously. Look for trends rather than reacting to every small movement.

Day	Fish behavior	Food eaten?	Ammonia	Nitrite	Temp	Notes / action
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						

Daily 3-minute check

- ☐ All fish are accounted for
- ☐ Breathing looks steady
- ☐ Swimming and posture look normal for the species
- ☐ No one fish is being relentlessly chased
- ☐ Filter flow and heater indicator look normal
- ☐ Temperature is within the planned range

Feed lightly

Offer only what the fish can finish promptly. Remove obvious uneaten food. Overfeeding creates more waste at the exact moment the filter is adjusting to new livestock.

Food used: _____

Normal portion: _____

Act promptly if: ammonia or nitrite is detectable, several fish breathe at the surface, the heater fails, fish lose balance, or a fish has visible injury or rapidly worsening symptoms. Test the water, confirm temperature and equipment, and seek experienced help.

Do not “deep clean” a new aquarium. Avoid replacing all filter media, scrubbing every surface, or making several chemical adjustments at once. Protect the biological filter you worked to establish.

A simple routine you can actually keep

Most healthy aquariums do better with small, consistent care than occasional full cleanouts.

Daily

- ☐ Observe fish
- ☐ Check temperature
- ☐ Check filter flow
- ☐ Remove uneaten food

Weekly

- ☐ Test water
- ☐ Partial water change as needed
- ☐ Vacuum visible debris
- ☐ Clean viewing glass

Monthly check

- ☐ Inspect filter and impeller
- ☐ Trim plants
- ☐ Check cords and plugs
- ☐ Review stocking and growth

Four-week planner

Task	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Water test ammonia / nitrite / nitrate / pH				
Temperature				
Water changed record amount				
Substrate cleaned				
Glass cleaned				
Plants trimmed				
Filter flow checked				
Filter media rinsed? only if flow slowed; use removed tank water				
Notes				

Water-change starting point: A partial weekly change is common, but the right amount depends on stocking, species, tank size, plant growth, and test results. Match new water temperature and always condition tap water.

Never wash biological filter media under untreated tap water. Gently swish reusable media in water removed from the aquarium so you keep the bacteria while removing loose debris.

Maintenance safety: Keep electrical connections dry, follow equipment instructions before placing your hands in the tank, never start a siphon by mouth, cover open cuts, and wash your hands afterward.

Something feels off. What should I check first?

Use the clearest symptom, then work through the basics before changing the whole tank.

- 1 Look at the fish for two quiet minutes.**
Are they breathing fast, at the surface, hiding, sitting on the bottom, swimming strangely, refusing food, or being chased?



- 2 Test the water.**
Check ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH, and temperature. Clear water can still contain invisible pollutants.



- 3 Check equipment.**
Is the filter flowing? Is the heater working? Is the water level correct? Is there surface movement?



- 4 Think about recent changes.**
New fish, large cleaning, replaced media, extra food, medication, decoration, plant melt, power outage, or a room-temperature change?



- 5 Make the smallest safe correction.**
If ammonia or nitrite is detectable, perform a partial change with conditioned, temperature-matched water and keep testing. Fix equipment failures promptly.



- 6 Document and reassess.**
Write down what you changed and watch the response. Avoid stacking several treatments unless a qualified professional directs you.

Usually monitor calmly

A new fish hiding briefly, a betta resting in a normal posture, a single skipped meal, a small amount of algae, or temporary cloudiness in a newly established tank - provided water tests and breathing are normal.

Get help promptly

Loss of balance, gasping, severe lethargy, visible sores, fuzzy growth, major swelling, rapid worsening, several fish affected at once, or repeated abnormal water-test results.

Know what is normal for your fish

The most useful warning sign is often a change from the fish's usual behavior, appearance, breathing, or appetite.

Behavior and breathing

- ☐ Hanging at the surface or near strong filter flow
- ☐ Sitting on the bottom much more than usual
- ☐ Erratic, spinning, drifting, or unbalanced swimming
- ☐ Breathing much faster or slower than normal
- ☐ Sudden hiding, aggression, or isolation
- ☐ Rubbing or flashing against objects repeatedly

Appearance and appetite

- ☐ Pale, darkened, or patchy color
- ☐ Clamped, frayed, or damaged fins
- ☐ White spots, fuzzy growth, sores, or missing scales
- ☐ Swelling, bloating, or weight loss
- ☐ Reduced appetite or refusing food
- ☐ More than one fish showing the same change

1. Test the water. 2. Check temperature and filter flow. 3. Review recent changes. 4. Correct obvious water or equipment problems. 5. Contact a knowledgeable aquatic professional or fish veterinarian if symptoms are serious, spreading, or worsening.

Observation notes

Fish/species: _____

Date and time first noticed: _____

Water readings: ammonia _____ nitrite _____ nitrate _____ pH _____ temp _____

Recent change: _____

Avoid random medication. Similar symptoms can come from water quality, temperature, stress, injury, parasites, or infection. Treating the wrong cause can delay proper care and disturb the biological filter.

My aquarium profile

Keep the details in one place so you can spot changes and explain the setup clearly when asking for help.

Tank details

Tank volume: _____
Setup date: _____
Filter: _____
Heater setting: _____
Usual temperature: _____
Typical pH: _____
Water source: _____

Livestock and feeding

Species and number: _____

Food: _____
Feeding schedule: _____
Last fish added: _____

Maintenance routine

Usual water-change day: _____ Typical amount changed: _____
Water conditioner: _____ Test kit: _____

Research basis

This guide was developed from PetYeti's beginner aquarium resources and reviewed against fish-welfare and veterinary guidance. Exact care needs vary by species, stocking, tank size, and local water.

RSPCA: aquarium selection, placement, filtration, fishless cycling, temperature, and water-quality basics.

Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA): freshwater water testing, ammonia/nitrite guidance, weekly observation, and warning signs.

Merck Veterinary Manual: preventive fish care, routine checks, maintenance, and common signs of illness.

American Veterinary Medical Association: suitable environment, water quality, diet, and responsible fish selection.

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