

# The All-Wet Pet

Fish are soothing—and stimulating. Here's how to dip your toe in BY STEPHANIE STEPHENS

**M**aybe you'd like a pet—but you're allergic, your condo won't allow it, or you travel for business. And maybe you considered getting an aquarium but dismissed the idea because, well, let's face it: Fish just aren't as warm and cuddly as cats and dogs. You can't curl up on the couch with a guppy. At least, not for long.

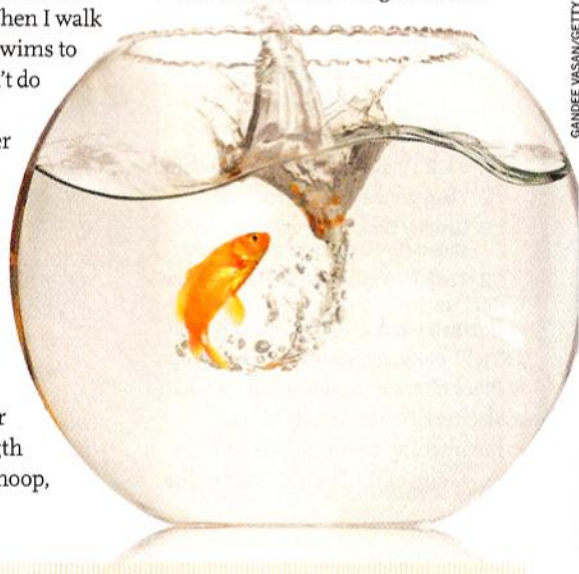
But don't sell fish short. They're really not dull or passive, says Laura Muha, author of *The Super Simple Guide to Breeding Freshwater Fishes*. "Fish absolutely interact with us and have definite personalities," says Muha. "When I walk near my tank, one of my fish swims to the top and wiggles. He doesn't do that for anyone else."

And, says software engineer Dean Pomerleau of Gibsonia, PA, "Fish are a lot smarter than they're given credit for." His proof: Albert Einstein, the 4-year-old calico fantail goldfish he and his 10-year-old son, Kyle, bought for \$20. After a few months of training, Albert now heads a soccer ball, "runs" a football the length of his tank, swims through a hoop,

and dances the limbo. The Pomerleaus turned their experience into Fish School Inc. ([www.fish-school.com](http://www.fish-school.com)), a program they say you can use to teach your old—or new—fish a few tricks.

Not ready to open your own aqua circus? You might just want to watch your goldfish swim lazily around a bowl. That alone can translate into major health benefits. Research shows that observing fish can lower blood pressure, decrease heart rate, calm anxiety, and relieve muscle tension.

It doesn't take much to get started:



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158 PREVENTION

## healthy pet

just a bowl of water, a fish, and food. At the other end of the spectrum, a salt-water tank allows you to have more flamboyant, exotic fish, but might require a professional to set up and maintain. Whether you simply want to test the water or are ready to immerse yourself, here's how to launch a fish hobby.

**A CINCH** Try one freshwater betta (pictured)—aka Siamese fighting fish—in a bowl or vase.

**Advantage** No-sweat care. You have to change the water weekly, but you don't need a filter. "Bettas actually get oxygen from the air, if necessary," says Luis Morales, speaker chairman for the Jersey Shore Aquarium Society in Freehold, NJ, and multi-aquarium owner. **Budget** \$5 to \$15 for a bowl or vase; fish cost \$2 to \$5 each.

**EASY** Move up to a room-temperature freshwater tank with a filter and a hood to stop "jumpers."

**Advantage** More fish, more entertainment. Choose popular—though messy and fast-growing—goldfish, or colorful and flashy White Cloud Mountain minnows; both will put on a show

for years. **Budget** About \$50 for fish and a 5- to 10-gallon tank with a thin layer of gravel, and \$15 to \$60 for a filter.

**GETTING FANCY** Add a heater to your 10-gallon or larger filtered freshwater tank, and it becomes *tropical*.

**Advantage** You can trade your common goldies for exotic African cichlids such as the electric blue or fluorescent yellow varieties. **Budget** \$30 to \$50 for the tank and gravel; fish cost \$5 to \$25 each.



### How to keep them swimming

Fish may be quiet, but you can't just forget they're there. **Overfeeding can kill them**, so ask about their nutrition requirements when you purchase them. If you add to your school, the general rule is no more than one 1-inch fish per gallon of water. Replace 10 to 20% of the water monthly. Finally, if you're using tap water, add a water conditioner that removes chlorine.

**ELABORATE** Step up to a heated salt-water tank.

**Advantage** This is the ultimate exotic tank—fill it with wildly colored damsels and you may never watch TV again. **Budget** Fish range from about \$5 to more than \$200. You'll spend \$245 or much, *much* more for a 29-gallon tank or larger, a filter and protein skimmer to capture waste products and clean the water, and a good beginner's book such as *The New Marine Aquarium: Step by Step Setup and Stocking Guide* by Michael S. Paletta. Short on time but love the fish? Check your phone book for aquarium maintenance services.

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