



Axolotls

Ambystoma mexicanum

INTERMEDIATE • 9–12 IN ADULT • 10–15 YR LIFESPAN • FULLY AQUATIC • COOL WATER • MEXICO

The salamander that never grows up. Axolotls keep their feathery larval gills for life, wear a permanent half-smile, and can regrow a lost limb. No wonder they're one of the hobby's favorite amphibians. The honest headline: this is a cold-water aquarium project, not a terrarium pet. Master cycling and keep the water cool and clean, and this odd little Mexican native will charm you for over a decade.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Water temp	60–68 °F
Heating	None; chiller often needed
UVB	Not required
Diet (carnivore)	Earthworms, pellets, bloodworms
Feeding	Every 2–3 days
Adult size	9–12 in
Adult tank	36×18×18 min; 48×18×18 preferred
Lifespan	10–15 years



The feathery headdress is a set of working gills: axolotls stay larval for life. Captive-bred morphs are NARBC show regulars.

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01

Look, Don't Touch

An axolotl is a salamander that stays larval forever (gills out, fully aquatic, never leaving the water). That permeable skin makes them a look-don't-touch animal: move one with a soft net or wet, clean, soap-free hands, and only when you must. They're famous limb-regenerators and surprisingly interactive at the glass. Check your laws first: axolotls are illegal to keep in California, Maine, New Jersey, Virginia, and DC.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Floor space matters more than height. Axolotls walk the bottom, so pick long, horizontal tanks. Budget 20 gallons per axolotl and 10 more for each additional animal, and know that cohabitation is a gamble: hatchlings and juveniles eat smaller tankmates, and even adults nip gills and toes. Raising them solo or strictly size-matched is the safe road. A grown animal does best in a 48×18×18; the table below tracks the stages.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	12×8×8	18×10×10	Very small at hatching; raise individually to prevent cannibalism.
Juvenile	20×10×12	24×12×12	House alone or separate by size; will eat smaller tankmates.
Subadult	36×15×15	36×18×18	Reaches near-adult size by 12–18 months.
Adult	36×18×18	48×18×18	20 gal min per axolotl, +10 each extra; strong filtration, low flow.

Enclosure minimums and preferred sizes follow Habitat-OS life-stage guidance.

03

Cold Is the Whole Game

Skip the heater. With axolotls, the danger runs the other way. **Keep the water at 60–68 °F**; sustained warmth stresses the gills, kills appetite, and opens the door to fungus. In a warm house that means a cool room, a fan across the water, or a proper aquarium chiller (plan for it before summer, not during it). Light is easy: no UVB required, just low, indirect light and shaded hides. A dim tank is a confident axolotl.

04

Water Quality & Cycling

This is an aquarium hobby wearing a salamander costume. The water does the keeping. Cycle the tank before the axolotl arrives, then hold ammonia and nitrite at zero with weekly tests and partial water changes. Every drop of tap water gets dechlorinator first: chlorine and chloramine burn amphibian skin and kill filter bacteria. Axolotls hate current, so run filtration strong but slow and baffle the outflow. Keep soaps and chemicals away from anything that touches the tank.

05

Substrate & Enrichment

The floor is a welfare decision: fine sand or a bare bottom only. Axolotls inhale food off the substrate, and swallowed gravel causes deadly impactions. Skip anything pea-sized. Beyond that, furnish for a shade-loving bottom-walker: a hide per animal, smooth rock, silk or live low-light plants, and open floor to patrol. Everything that goes in the tank gets rinsed in plain water, never soap.

06

Feeding

Carnivores with a simple menu. Earthworms are the staple; sinking axolotl pellets round out the diet, and bloodworms and brine shrimp do the work for younger, smaller mouths. Feed every 2–3 days, and pull whatever isn't eaten before it fouls the water. Feeding and filtration are the same job here. Tong-feeding keeps meals off the substrate and turns dinner into the most interactive minute of axolotl keeping.

07

Health Red Flags

Axolotls announce trouble through gills and skin: filaments shrinking or curled forward, cotton-white fungus patches, sloughing slime coat, frantic swimming, uncontrolled floating, or days of refused food. Check the tank before the animal; test water and temperature the same day, since most emergencies are heat or ammonia in disguise. If signs persist in clean, cold water, especially fungus or a wound that won't heal, see an amphibian-savvy exotics vet.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.