

SUPPLIES AND PET CARING ADVICE FOR REPTILE ENTHUSIASTS

Thinking About a Reptile? – Owning a reptile is becoming more and more popular every day. The variations in lizards, snakes, turtles, amphibians, and other reptiles can really make reptile ownership a fun experience. Whether owning one animal, multiple animals, or different types of reptiles, owning a reptile can be a daily adventure and really set somebody out from the crowd. However owning a reptile, or any animal for that matter, should never be done as a fad. Caring for another animal is a huge responsibility, and owning a reptile is no different.

When owning a reptile, many things need to be considered. The first consideration is that reptiles need a large enclosure or terrarium. An owner will have to provide bedding, water, plants, rocks, ground cover, and food, not to mention all the accessories that will make owning a reptile so much fun! Not only can the costs add up before you realize it, but there will be regular maintenance costs, vet bills (yes you need to take your reptile to the doctor when it's sick too!), and food generally needs to be purchased weekly – it's usually alive!

If you want to own a reptile, costs can definitely be a factor in whether you decide to make that purchase. A reptile is an investment, and it takes time and money to care for the animal. You may want to consider the cost and accessibility of the food necessary for the reptile's survival. Do you have a place to store food, if that is an option? Do you have the stomach to handle living food? Mice? Baby rats? Crickets? Meal worms? Not to mention that mice and rats can cost up to \$2 each, with an average snake needing to eat 4 per week. 10 crickets might cost a couple dollars too, and a small lizard can eat that in a week! Your reptile will need distilled drinking water as well, and that will cost money as well.

When making your initial purchase, you should expect to spend anywhere from one hundred to two hundred dollars on just the terrarium, rocks, food and water dishes, initial bedding and flooring, heat rocks, plants and other accessories. The animal itself can cost anywhere from twenty dollars to \$350! So make sure you have the money to make the initial purchase of the reptile, while also being able to afford the maintenance and food every month. The reptile will grow and grow, and as it does it will require more food, more water, larger habitats, and thus more supplies.

It's important to educate yourself on the particular species of reptile you choose to own. Reptile care books are available at local libraries. However if you can't find the one that you want at the library, you can usually find one for less than ten dollars at most regular pet stores, and you will definitely find what you need at a reptile store or specialized reptile depot.

You may also need to purchase other important supplies for your reptile. These should be taken into consideration before purchasing a reptile. A filter for an aquatic reptile or amphibian aquarium can cost almost forty dollars. If you own an iguana, food can be very costly as they need to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as live food like meal worms. Most reptiles need an ultra violet light, and a different reptile may need a different type of UV light.

Bedding for all reptiles must be kept clean to avoid disease, mold or fungus. It also needs to be kept clean to avoid ant infestations, or infestations of the insects you feed your reptile. Crickets will breed in the stems of the plants that you provide your animal if they are left in the cage too long or mature while in the cage. Then you will have hundreds of tiny crickets in your house – because they are small enough to escape. Meal worms may burrow into the flooring or bedding if they are left unchecked, and then you will have German beetles in your terrarium. Reptiles will often become sick due to overexposure to its own urine and feces. The cost can start at \$2.50 and rise depending on where you purchase and what you prefer. Just keep in mind that not all bedding is

safe for all animals. Replacement will depend on the size of the housing, the size of your reptile, and how many reptiles you own.

If you have a reptile that climbs, you may need a fresh air habitat with a mesh screen and water resistant bottom. A green iguana or large monitor will enjoy its life significantly better if it is able to move freely. Small fresh air reptile enclosures can cost around \$40. But it will cost nearly \$150 for a large habitat – which you will want to get so your reptile doesn't out grow it.

UV Lighting will run you about \$25 for a 10 inch clamp-on lamp that dims. There's also the cost of the electricity needed to run the environmental equipment. And you will likely want to buy a timer for that light, so you can control the day and night of your animal to keep them out of or put them into breeding season. Remember, owning a reptile is a huge responsibility. Some reptiles can live many years. Some even longer than you. You must take into consideration the quality of life you can provide your reptile before you ever make that purchase!

Process of Selecting a Convenient Reptile Store – When shopping for reptile supplies or cages, it is highly important to find the right reptile store geared towards your specific reptile needs. While you might be looking for cheap alternatives or a higher quality store, some animals have very specific needs that may force you to look for a reptile store that specializes in exotic animals or your particular animal. There are many different types of reptile stores, so it's important to know the differences prior to just purchasing your supplies from any reptile store.

Online Reptile Stores – Online reptile stores are becoming more and more popular and have become a great resource for purchasing items that you wouldn't normally find at a regular store. The only down side of this process is not seeing the actual product before purchasing it. Also, you may need to return items if you aren't happy with your purchase so this may pose some problems depending on the online stores rules on returns or exchanges. Before going to a reptile store online, you generally want to have knowledge of what you want prior to making your search. It's probably a good idea to visit some physical stores or see some items at a reptile store before shopping online.

Regular Pet Stores – Regular pet stores such as the huge chains you might across from driving around your neighborhood or even smaller mom-and-pop shops can carry a variety of reptile pet accessories and items. They often have reptile cages, terrariums, food, accessories, and even the actual animals themselves. However, it is crucial to understand that these stores are not specifically made for reptiles. They may only hold a very small selection of items and the staff may hold very little training when it comes to handling reptiles and amphibians.

Special Reptile Stores – A reptile store is not an unsearchable store to find. In most major cities or even smaller towns, often there is a wide selection of exotic pet stores that caters specifically to reptiles and other animals. While going to these types of reptile stores may seem like the best situation for finding the best equipment, they can often be hard to find depending on your specific location. However, compared to larger chain pet stores, the staff at these specific stores can hold more information and knowledge on the specific reptile or animal you are shopping for.

When it comes to the overall health of your animal or reptile, it is highly advised to visit these specialty stores rather than larger chains. As great as these stores may sound, there is a down side. They are often privately owned and smaller than chain stores and they serve a very small subculture of pet owners. So prices tend to be a little bit higher, especially on items you can find at another source. However taking price out of consideration, they are the best option for finding what you need or for educating yourself on the needs of your reptile.

If you are considering getting a reptile, it's very important to find the right reptile store before purchasing the animal itself. You want to have a good relationship with the employees and handlers, so you can become a better reptile owner in the process of purchasing whatever reptile supplies and equipment that you need. Research is always key towards taking proper care of your reptile.

THE BEST REPTILE PETS

The Interest Factor – Whether the child is six or sixteen, most lose interest in their reptile after the initial thrill has worn off. This is true of many adults, especially those who acquire reptiles that are more work than they bargained for. The daily grind of food preparation, cleaning and disinfecting the enclosure, checking the water, the temperatures, making sure it is shedding properly, taming it, getting pooped on, remembering to close and secure the enclosure, spending the allowance or limited budget on lighting and heating and food supplies (or begging parents or family for the same), blowing the savings on emergency veterinary care because one or more of the above weren't provided or done, all conspire to make even the best intentioned, most avid child (and spouse) find other things to take their time.

The “Caterpillar” Factor – Richard O'Barry, founder of the Dolphin Project, has said “Teaching a child not to step on a caterpillar is as important to the child as it is the caterpillar.” Teaching your child why she can't have that lizard or frog or snake is just as important to you and the child as it is to the animal itself. Keeping animals of any sort is a major responsibility. It is a life-long commitment (the life of the animal, which may well exceed your child's middle school, high school and college years). It is not something to be done lightly, nor with the thought that if it doesn't work out, or if the child gets bored, you can just give it to a zoo or sell it. The increasing number of reptiles being given away for whom no homes can be found tells just how unrealistic this attitude is. Being tired of the whining and begging is simply not a good enough reason to potentially put the life of an animal at risk.

The “Vet” Factor – Not all vets are knowledgeable about reptile medicine. We do have a few knowledgeable reptile vets in our area, but they may not be as close to your home as you would like.

How much money can you spend? – Remember that the cost of the reptile is generally the cheapest part of getting a reptile. On top of the cost of the reptile itself is the enclosure (and despite all cautions, most people still start off with ones that are too small and so have to buy a new one within a year or so), the furnishings, the substrate, the lighting equipment and supplies, the heating equipment and supplies, cleaning equipment and supplies, food, housing and food for the food (when you have to supply crickets and worms and things). For example, that \$10 iguana will actually cost you \$250 or more, that \$6 anole will cost you \$75-\$100. Lizards, on the whole are much more expensive than snakes when everything is taken into consideration. And then there's the monthly costs of heating the herp.

How much room can you spare for an enclosure? – One of the most common mistakes is that people buy enclosures that are too small. While the enclosure may fit the animal at the time of purchase, reptiles grow, often reaching adult size within a year or two. It is cruel and inhumane to house an animal in an enclosure that is too small. It causes severe stress which leads to illness and behavioral problems. Such animals spend most of their time trying to break out of their enclosure, often injuring themselves severely enough to require veterinary

care. For some reptiles, there are no commercially made enclosures big enough for these animals. This means that you must build, or have built, an enclosure that may ultimately take up a good portion of your living space.

Can you feed one animal to another? – Most snakes and lizards that eat rodents will cheerfully take killed prey, and for their own safety and for the humane treatment of the prey, should be fed killed prey. That means, however, that if you cannot find a pet store that will kill it humanely for you, you will have to kill the prey humanely yourself, or buy prey in bulk from breeders who will ship it to you already killed and frozen. Which means that the family needs to accept the fact that, in the freezer, amongst the chicken and ice cream, is a bag or two of mousicles... Mealworms and crickets need to be fed live... can you do this? If housing and caring for insects, keeping containers of worms and beetle larvae in the refrigerator isn't appealing, or keeping baggies of pre-killed mice, rats or rabbits (whole rabbits, not neatly butchered ones from your meat market)) in the freezer, if you can't kill them humanely yourself, is not an option for you, then a carnivorous or omnivorous reptile is not for you. The commercial foods and dried insects available are not appropriate replacements for fresh, whole prey, and in many cases the reptiles will not even touch them.

Can you prepare fresh foods on a regular basis? – Americans have a strange conception of what 'vegetables' are. They are not the things you find on top of a fast food burger, nor even what you will find at most salad bars. When you have an omnivorous or herbivorous lizard or turtle and tortoise, you must be prepared to buy a variety of healthy vegetables, greens and fruits and prepare them in such a way as to enable the reptile to maximize its intake and digestion. You may have to hit a couple of grocery stores, or convince the produce manager at your regular store, to get what you need, and then spend an hour or two a week preparing the foods.

Can you afford the upkeep? – This includes regular changes of substrate, cleaning supplies (including separate sponges, disinfectant, rubber gloves, etc, just for the reptile), food, and veterinary care, as well as lighting and heating equipment and supplies, often including special (and expensive) UVB fluorescent tubes that need to be replaced every 6 months.

Suitable Starters

Most reptiles are skittish when you first get them (even species recommended as good starter reptiles) and need to be handled carefully. Handlers are likely to get pooped on or musked, or the animal quickly escapes their grasp. Kids are prone to just drop the animal when it starts thrashing or entwining around their fingers or arm, and they tend to squeal and throw an animal that poops on them – teenagers as well as young children have exhibited this reaction, so the age of your child is not necessarily a good determinant. An adult must always do the initial handling, giving close supervision until they are satisfied that the child is capable of not being freaked out and the animal exhibits a degree of comfort being held by the child.

Leopard Gecko – These small nocturnal insectivores (who get big enough to feed on pinkie mice) can do well in a 20 gallon aquarium with several inches of clean playground-type sand, an undertank heating pad, an overhead nocturnal heat source (sometimes), hollow log and bark slab, and water bowl. Maximum size is 8 inches. Temperament is very sweet though may be skittish at first. Have been popular captive-bred lizards for decades.

Bearded Dragon – Diurnal desert dweller. Normal colored babies are cheap but if sold too small they have a lower survival rate. Buy one at least 6 inches long. Smaller beardies are more difficult to feed, with intestinal

impaction from insect exoskeletons and paralysis and seizures – even death – from being fed prey that is too big, all too common. These guys need the least amount of work in terms of taming – they are pretty much big lazy slugs. They do go into a winter slowdown, a period of long inactivity (sleeping for days or weeks) interspersed with a bit of wakefulness, eat a bit, drink a bit, then down again for several weeks. Grow up to 20 inches.

Blue-Tongue Skink – These low-slung, wide-bodied lizards look like a giant alligator lizard with skin like your kitchen floor. Like the bearded dragon, these Australian natives are strictly available as captive bred lizards here in the US. Blue-tongue skinks are omnivorous, requiring a temperate woodland type of environment, with temperatures in the mid-70's to mid-80's. They need some access to UVB which can be easily supplied by taking them outside with you for awhile during clement weather, and by providing a UVB fluorescent during the winter months. Grows up to 24 inches. They like to move about and wander, so a larger than expected enclosure is a must.

Savanna Monitor – These strictly wild-caught, strictly carnivorous lizards are one of the most common of the small monitor lizards. They also have one of the nicest temperaments – when you get them tamed. They are masters of scrabbling backwards in your arms and hands, leaving trails of scratches in their wake. You do need to be careful when feeding them their mice, however – they get extremely eager and easily mistake your fingers for the mouse, so always use tongs. Temperatures from mid-70's to mid-80's with a slightly higher basking area. UVB occasionally. Hissy and thrashy initially, lots of bluff but rarely a bite. Once tamed by an adult, are usually suitable for handling by middle childhood age kids. Grows up to 4 feet. Good climbers, they need large, well secured enclosures.

Captive Bred Ball Pythons – I cannot stress enough the importance of only, only, only, ONLY buying a captive bred, by the person from whom you are buying, ball python. If you buy a healthy captive bred one who is feeding well then you will have a wonderful snake – all the fun of the large pythons without the bulk or size or potential for harm. Grows up to 4 feet.

In closing... Experts estimate that between 50% – 90% of reptiles die their first year in captivity, on top of the 10% - 50% that died during the importation process. The reasons for their dying once they reach the importing country are primarily due to people not knowing what they are getting in to, relying on inaccurate care information (including that provided by most pet stores), and not being able to afford the necessary equipment and upkeep.

If reptiles were as cool and easy to take care for as too many people think they are, then reptile rescue groups, herpetological and humane societies wouldn't be getting literally dozens of calls a week from people trying to give away their reptiles. Yes, give away. Besides the 20 - 40 calls every month from iguana owners who no longer want their lizards, I take calls from people trying to get rid of many different types of reptiles (most common: Burmese pythons, red-tailed boas, large monitor lizards, aquatic turtles and box turtles).

Keeping a reptile properly can provide a wonderful learning experience for the family. But so, too, can choosing not to keep one.

WORST REPTILE PETS

With all of the reptile species available today has come some misconceptions about which reptiles are best for beginning hobbyists. The cheapest species are very often not the easiest or most suitable for the beginner. Several species have in fact, been traditionally sold as “starter” reptile pets, when in fact, they are far from suitable. Many of these “starter” reptile species should only be kept by experienced herpetocultuists.

What Makes a Reptile Species Difficult?

Just with the best reptile species, there are several factors that contribute to making a reptile the “worst” species for beginners. Aggressive reptile species should not be kept by beginning hobbyists, these animals can be difficult to handle and can cause injury to an inexperienced keeper. Reptile species that are heavily parasitized, as is the case with the majority of imported species, are difficult to maintain for the beginner and should be avoided. Large species that are potentially dangerous, or that are expensive to feed, house, and maintain should be left to experienced keepers. Reptiles that require demanding environmental conditions, or reptiles that stress in captivity easily are difficult to maintain for everyone, not just beginners. Unfortunately, there is rather a long list of difficult reptile species, but it is important to know which commonly seen species to avoid.

Burmese, Reticulated, and African Rock Pythons – All of these species are very cute as hatchlings, but quickly grow HUGE no matter what size of enclosure they are kept in. Although Burmese pythons often can become very tame, this is seldom true for the other two species, reticulated and African Rock pythons. A large, aggressive snake is not much fun to maintain for the beginner. Unfortunately, these species are so prolific, there are many captive born hatchlings for sale on the market. Subsequently, the price is relatively low for a hatchling, and this often tempts beginning keepers into a purchase they should avoid. Adults of these species require room sized enclosures, and can be expensive to feed and maintain.

Green Iguanas – Green iguanas are by far the most common reptile pet on the market. This is unfortunate as this species is not suitable for the beginner for several reasons. Iguanas are large lizards, adults can easily exceed 5 feet. Iguanas require very large room size enclosures to fare well, and most homes cannot provide for this necessity. There is no aquarium/cage on the commercial market that is large enough to house an adult iguana. Although some iguanas can become tame, many never do, and some animals may even be aggressive, especially males. Iguanas have specific dietary and environmental requirements in captivity that cannot be met by children of any age, so they do not make good children’s pets. This species is one of the cheapest on the market today with the beginning housing requirements being in the 100’s of dollars, do not let cheap price fool you, iguanas are difficult, demanding and expensive captives.

Box Turtles – Box turtles have been sold for many years as a “easy to maintain” or “ideal children’s reptile pet”. Neither of these two statements are true. The majority of people who wish to purchase box turtles want to maintain them inside year-round. This presents several difficulties. Box turtles require a lot of room to fare well, even one box turtle cannot be housed in an enclosure any smaller than a 30 gallon breeder aquarium. Almost all box turtles are wild-caught adult animals that are heavily parasitized. As with the green iguana, box turtles require very specific dietary and environmental conditions, which make this species less than ideal for the beginner. If the purchaser researches all the captive needs of box turtles, and can find a captive born animal to

purchase, box turtles make excellent captives. Unfortunately, this seldom occurs, and box turtles die by the thousands due to ignorance.

Green Anoles – Anoles are another “disposable reptile” in the industry. Green anoles are a lot more difficult to maintain than most people realize. Many people purchase anoles as pets for their children because they are very inexpensive. What they do not realize, or are not told, is that the proper set-up for anoles is ten times the purchase price of the animal. Anoles are still relatively inexpensive even with the proper equipment, but there are several other factors that make this species a less than ideal captive. Almost all anoles on the market are wild-caught animals that are heavily parasitized. Even a healthy looking anole can carry a huge parasite load that will eventually lead to its demise. Anoles DO NOT tolerate handling well. This lizard is naturally very wary (everyone eats them) and become very stressed by handling. Captive born anoles in the proper, naturalistic enclosure can make a beautiful display, but they are not suitable for beginning reptile pets.

The Tokay Gecko – There are few other reptile species of any genera more aggressive than the tokay gecko. This species is very common on the market, and is subsequently very low priced. Most tokays are imported animals and have all the problems that go with this process. Tokay geckos, with very few exceptions, do not become docile and do not tolerate handling well. In addition, they are extremely quick and, as with all arboreal geckos, can climb even slick surfaces with ease. The first thing a tokay gecko does when it feels threatened (which seems to be anytime anything comes near one) is to gape its prodigious mouth as a warning, which is why most close photographs of the tokay geckos show the animal in this position. The second course of action for a threatened tokay is a low barking noise followed by a lunge at the threatening object (if you are keeping one, this is usually your hand). The last course of action is biting, and boy, can they bite! Tokay geckos have very strong jaws, capable of causing serious injury to anyone fool enough to be bitten by one of these animals. This beautiful and interesting gecko can make a good captive for those who are experienced in handling aggressive, fast-moving reptile species. Beginners generally do not fall into this category, so should pass this species by when looking for a new purchase.

Water Turtles (Any Species) – Water turtles are inexpensive and often sold illegally (under 4”), however the set up for a water turtle is 100’s of dollars. You need a tank, filter, landing dock, heater, UVB light and basking light. Turtles eat a huge varied diet and can carry salmonella. Keeping a turtle tank clean is a daily chore and usually the smell alone is overwhelming. The worst part is that they are known to bite.

With so many reptile choices on the market today, it is sometimes difficult for a beginning hobbyist to choose an appropriate reptile pet. There are many reptile species that are wonderful for beginners, but there are many commonly available and cheap species that are not. It is important that beginning hobbyists have good experiences with the reptiles they choose to purchase, as this encourages them to become more involved in a fascinating hobby that will last a lifetime.