



REPTILES FOR BEGINNERS

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Reptiles have very specific environmental and dietary needs. The goal in keeping a reptile in captivity is to provide it an enclosure that is as close to its natural habitat as possible. This requires some time to research what species of reptile will best fit the family's lifestyle and budget. For example, some reptiles like snakes and iguanas will grow to be very large and require many different enclosures throughout their lives to accommodate their size needs. Sometimes they can get so large that a room-sized enclosure is their final living place. The temperature and humidity needs can be very specific for reptiles and sometimes the room that the reptile lives in must be at different temperatures than the rest of the house, which can get complicated as well as expensive. Time can also play a significant factor in reptile care and a family that is away for long periods during the day or on vacation frequently may not be able to provide the needed attention to the monitoring of the environmental needs of the reptile. Before acquiring a reptile, here are some necessary topics to consider to ensure that the reptile will get the proper care and attention for a long and healthy life.

- Choose a suitable reptile for your lifestyle - Research the natural history for the species you are interested in before acquiring it and make sure that you can meet the environmental and dietary needs.
- Consider the cost of the actual animal and initial set-up - the enclosure, the furnishings, the substrate, the lighting equipment, the heating equipment, cleaning equipment, food, housing and food for the food if you are supplying crickets or worms, and the veterinary care.
- Consider the enclosure size - the bigger the better within reason but remember, these animals will grow and most people make the mistake of purchasing an enclosure that is too small.
- Consider the feeding items - most snakes and lizards eat killed prey items like rodents. Sometimes pet stores will not kill the rodents for you and it is important whether you will be able to kill and feed another animal to your pet. Also, housing and caring for worms and crickets, keeping these prey items in the refrigerator, keeping pre-killed rodents in the freezer, etc. does not appeal to your lifestyle, then a carnivorous or omnivorous reptile is not for you. There are no substitutes like commercial foods that are nutritionally sound or appeal to most reptiles.
- Can you prepare the fresh foods on a regular basis? Purchasing and appropriately preparing healthy, fresh vegetables, greens, and fruits is critical for the health of herbivorous reptiles. Sometimes finding the freshest produce requires going to several different stores, and then spending an hour or two preparing the foods for your pet. Even if you are willing to do this for your reptile, herbivorous reptiles are some of the most difficult and demanding of all to keep.
- Consider the cost of daily upkeep - This includes regular changes of substrate, cleaning supplies, food, regular veterinary care, as well as lighting and heating equipment that will need replacing every 6-12 months.

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- Find a qualified veterinarian. It is imperative that a qualified veterinarian that is well-versed in reptiles is practicing medicine in your area. Not every veterinarian is interested or knowledgeable about reptiles and even a veterinarian that sees pocket pets like hamsters and gerbils is not necessarily able to treat reptiles.
- There are also zoonotic risks involved with keeping reptiles. Reptiles are known to carry salmonella and cryptosporidium in their GI tracts. This poses a health risk to anybody that handles the animal, but this can be especially dangerous to those individuals that are immune-compromised, which includes the elderly, children, and those with diabetes or being treated with chemotherapy medications.

Suitable Starters

The criteria used for choosing a reptile for a pet are ease of keeping, moderate size (8 inches to 4 feet), and ease of taming, which requires significant parent involvement when children are present. Children should not be expected to be the sole caregivers for these pets as they require significantly detailed care. Parents must be prepared to oversee all handling and care to make sure that the reptile is getting its daily needs met. Listed below are some example of information to get you started but this information is basic information only to get one thinking about the process. More research is needed to adequately set up an enclosure and prepare for the feeding requirements of your chosen species. (See website listed below.)

Lizards

- *Bearded Dragons* – These are the best pet reptile. Bearded dragons are diurnal desert dweller that can live in a 55-60 gallon aquarium with several inches of clean playground sand (DO NOT use calci-sand from pet stores) , an under tank heating pad, and overhead nocturnal heat source, hollow log and bark slab, and water bowl. They also need very high heat during the day, and a special fluorescent bulb that produces UVB (290-320 nm wavelengths – something that only specially made, and rather expensive – fluorescent lights can do.) Babies are cheap but that’s because they have a lower survival rate. Buy one at least 6 inches long that will be big enough to start eating mouse pinkies, in addition to their fresh fruit and vegetable diet. Smaller bearded 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, which is all too common in baby bearded. These little lizards need the least amount of work in terms of taming. 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. Can grow to 20 inches.
- *Leopard Gecko* - These are small nocturnal insectivores that can do well in a 20-gallon aquarium set up just like the bearded dragon enclosure without the extra heat source. Maximum size is 8 inches. Temperament is very sweet though may be skittish at first.
- *Collarded Lizard* – Diurnal desert dwellers that can be set up like the bearded dragon. They also need much higher heat during the day, and a special fluorescent bulb that produces UVB (290-320 nm wavelengths – something that only specially made, and rather expensive – fluorescent lights can do.) Largely carnivorous, adults will eat some plant material. Most in stores are wild-caught. Grow to 10-12 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 U.S. Blue-tongue skinks are omnivorous, requiring a temperate woodland type of environment, with temperatures in the mid-70s to mid 80s. They need some access to UVB, which can be easily supplied by taking them outside with you for a while during warm weather, and by providing a UVB fluorescent during the winter months. They can grow to 24 inches and they like to move about and wander, so a larger than expected enclosure is a must.

Snakes

- *Captive Bred Corn Snake* – Corn snakes are the easily most domesticated of all snakes and widely available as captive bred. They can be native species in many states and should not be wild-caught to keep as a pet. They also come in a remarkably wide variety of colors. Hatchlings are barely bigger than a pencil but are active feeders. They can be a little skittish at this size, and certainly not appropriate for young children to handle at this age, but they rapidly put on mass and length, maxing out at 4 feet with a head no bigger than a small adult thumb. Sweet, inquisitive and gentle snakes, they are easily kept, singly or in pairs, in a 20 gallon enclosure as adults. Temperatures in the mid 70s-mid 80s, no special lighting, easily feed on killed mice.
- *Captive Bred Kingsnakes* – Most kings are also great starter snakes. They may be a little skittish at first, and may musk you during the first month, but once they realize you mean no harm and are, in fact, a nice warm place on which to hang out, they are calm and relaxed being handled. Captive bred kings are generally great eater and can be easily converted to feeding on defrosted prey. Temperatures need to range from the 70s - mid 80s. They should be kept singly due to their propensity to eat other snakes including other kings. Depending on species, may be kept in 20-30 gallon enclosure as adults.
- *Captive Bred Ball Pythons* – Only purchase captive bred ball pythons! This is critical because most pet stores sell wild-caught ones, which do not recognize mice as prey and have significant health problems. These snakes should only be purchased from a breeder that is willing to offer long-term assistance when needed. If you buy a healthy captive bred ball python who is feeding well, when you will have a wonderful snake. (Make sure to ask the breeder to feed the snake in your presence to ensure that it will eat because the biggest challenge with this species is its poor eating habits. Temperatures need to range from mid 70s - mid 80s. These snakes provide all the fun of large pythons without the size challenges.

Unsuitable Species

The criteria for unsuitable species are not handlable, very complex needs, delicacy, or are only sold as wild-caught so they have serious health problems. Some of these unsuitable species include: green iguanas (although captive-bred), uromastyx, anoles, day and tokay geckos, monitors, chameleons, and water dragons. Snake species that would not be recommended include any snake that requires two or more people to handle like Burmese pythons, hognose snakes because they are mildly venomous, water snakes, tree boas, and any wild caught species because it is illegal to capture the wild birds and mammals that they would naturally eat. These unsuitable species may be acceptable for more knowledgeable, seasoned reptile owners, but they are absolutely not good pets for beginners.

Turtles and Tortoises are also not recommended for beginners due to the complexity of needs that they have. Most are wild-caught which causes health concerns and makes for a poor doer in captivity.

Overall, reptiles are very difficult pets to keep for long periods of time. Experts estimate that between 50-90 reptiles die their first year in captivity, on top of the 10-50% that died during the importation process. These statistics are due to the lack of knowledge of the caregivers during the process and in the pet stores. Reptiles are the only species of animal kept as pets that do not reach their lifespan in captivity. Other animals kept in captivity as pets, reach or exceed their lifespan so captivity has a positive outcome for the species as a whole. For the sake of the reptiles alone, the pet trade has a negative impact to the numbers of animals in the wild.

If you are still interested in acquiring a reptile for a pet, it is important to research reptile rescue groups and herp societies for information on reptiles needing adoption. You can also gather more information from these places by other keepers of the species you may be interested in. Other keepers will have views and experiences that may be helpful. Whenever possible, select previously owned animals that need a new home, or buy a captive-bred species.

****Much of this information was acquired through Melissa Kaplan's website. This is a reputable and very detailed and informative site that we would recommend you research when looking for information regarding herp care. www.anapsid.org*

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