



## Reptiles as Pets

That cute 6-inch green lizard or spotted Leopard gecko or snake in the big box pet store catches your eye. Its tail wiggles and eyes gaze calmly at you. It seems easy to pick it up, pay the cashier and waltz home with your newfound friend. You just did the easy part. Now the work begins.

Hopefully before you purchase a reptile you do your homework. That means you have researched with your veterinarian and the Internet how to house feed and clean up your pet.

Ideally you have found a reputable reptile dealer that may breed its own reptiles and has in-depth knowledge and ability to answer your questions accurately. (I would recommend New England Reptile Distributors in Plaistow NH). Big box stores buy lots of young mass-produced reptiles, keep them in overcrowded conditions and sell them without much education on how to keep them healthy and alive.

At our practice we have seen many half dead blind baby leopard geckos that were purchased at a big box store, that are not kept in proper humidity, don't shed the eye caps properly, are blind and therefore can no longer chase their prey and feed themselves. This does make my blood boil because the happy acquisition of the cute lizard has turned into a very sad episode for the entire family. No one at the store took the time to explain to the family the many details of proper care that the pet should receive, including its first healthy trip to the vet.

Remember when you acquire a reptile that you may be its caretaker for 30 to 50 years. We see a number of turtles and tortoise that are 40 something years old. When our 13-year-old daughter investigated getting a ball python she asked us if we would care for her when she went to college. At the time, college seemed like it was so distant on the horizon. Now Rebecca is a college sophomore in California and we have Aida safely ensconced in her bedroom in Salem.

In general reptiles need to be housed in glass enclosures that are sufficiently large for their adult size. Large reptiles, such as iguanas that can reach 5-6 feet long including tail, need an enclosure as big and tall as a small room (6x10x8 feet). If you enclose two iguanas in an enclosure that is too small they will fight and be stressed. A male might harass a female too much during breeding season and she could become stressed and ill. Two males may fight for territory and severely injure each other.

Maintaining proper temperature gradients for your reptile is paramount because its metabolism rate depends entirely on the ambient temperature. If a reptile is basking on a

rock in the sun it's metabolism, meaning heart rate, respiration digestion appetite will all increase. It will move to a cooler area to slow down its metabolism. If your enclosure does not have a hot enough spot your reptile may not have the desire to eat or move due to a slow metabolism. You can use an under tank heating system, a ceramic heat lamp and a rock to create a warm environment and a heat gradient. A young water dragon may do fine with a 100 F sunspot. An adult may need it 10 degrees cooler. Specific temperatures are listed at a great website for reptiles [anapsid.org](http://anapsid.org).

Humidity is important. Many reptiles need a humidity level of 70% in order to shed properly. A big water bowl will help. Lizards and geckos just need a hide (cave) with some damp sphagnum moss. Turtles need a large aquarium to swim in and a real rock to bask on.

Lighting is very important for reptiles. Most, except for nocturnal geckos and snakes need a full spectrum, meaning UVA and UVB, sunlamp. It is not a plant light. One brand you can order that I trust is Vitalite. Remember to change the bulb every 4 to 6 months. The ultraviolet light allow your reptile to produce active vitamin D and absorb calcium properly for strong bones and proper egg laying.

Substrate is the material you place on the bottom of the cage. White ink free newspaper rolls are great. Other substrates are paper towels, Astroturf, sand and wood chips. All have their benefits and risks. If the wood chips are too small they may ingest them. Paper towels may move under a big reptile. Astroturf must be removed and hosed and disinfected. Research which substrate is best for your reptile.

Cleaning and disinfection is important because feces, food matter and mold must be removed to prevent your reptile from becoming sick with mouth skin or internal organ malfunction. Turtle tanks should have water changes weekly and have a great filter. You will keep the water cleaner by feeding in a separate tank.

Cages can be cleaned using hot soapy water with dish detergent or Simple Green. Then you can disinfect with a solution called Novalsan that is diluted in water according to the label. Bleach is very strong and fumes can be toxic to reptiles and us so if you use it you must put ¼ cup in a gallon of water. Let the solution sit on the glass surface for 30 minutes. Then rinse three times and air it out to get rid of fumes.

Taming is important for some of the bigger reptiles such as iguanas. Reptiles have not been domesticated. They have wild instincts and will attack if they feel threatened. Reptiles can be taught to be comfortable around humans if you work with them. I have seen litter trained green iguanas so it is possible.

With some research and dedication to maintaining a proper habitat for your reptile along with a proper diet and regular visits to your veterinarian you could have a tame, gorgeous exotic long-lived reptile in your life!

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