



## Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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# So, your folks won't let you have a reptile...

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Even when armed with all the information, including understanding that not all reptiles are dangerous, many parents are still unwilling to get a reptile for their kids, or allow their children to get a reptile. There may be many reasons for this, including knowing their kids well enough to know that a reptile may all too likely be a passing fad and being unwilling to take on the care of the reptile themselves (you may not think your folks have much of a life, but their days are probably overfilled with things to do as it is!). They may understand the financial commitments--and uncertainty--that a pet (or another pet) means, and may not feel they are able or are willing to make that commitment at this time.

So, what can you do besides whine, wheedle, beg and just generally make a pest of yourself?

### **Be responsible**

Start showing responsibility and commitment by paying greater attention to schoolwork and household chores, etc. If you already have assigned chores, do them enthusiastically and without complaint. Get your homework done on time; don't wait till the last minute to get to the library or hit the 'net to do your research, leave your homework at home, or run the thermometer under hot water to get out of going to school because you didn't study for that big test.

If you have been telling your parents that you will be conscientious about caring for a reptile, they will want to see you demonstrate that commitment by seeing you do the things you already need to do, and doing them when they need to be done. When your reptile's cage needs to be cleaned, or it needs to be fed or watered or have the heat light replaced, it can't wait - you need to get right on it. If you typically procrastinate and find other things to do, putting off what needs to be done, there is no reason for your parents to expect that you will be any different when it comes to caring for an animal of any type.

### **Do some research**

Start researching different species, including their care, availability in the pet trade, their good points and weak points as a pet, common health problems, temperament, the cost of an individual animal plus the costs associated with proper housing, feeding, vet care, and anticipated future expenses as the reptile outgrows its first enclosure.

While the total cost of any reptile far exceeds the reptile's sticker price, what it costs to set up a reptile in New York city may be very different than what it costs in Redding, California. What you need to do to research out housing expenses is to go to several local pet stores, pad of paper in hand, and start making some notes. Even the most easy-to-care-for reptile has some very specific requirements. Depending on what type you decide to get, basic equipment and furnishings include:

- Suitably sized enclosure (depending on the species, may need to start with anything from a 10-60 gallon tank)
- Securely fitted and lockable top if the tank isn't already furnished with one
- Proper substrate, including what you need to replace it after cleaning the tank
- Hide boxes or caves

- Climbing branches, bark slabs, logs
- Undertank heating device
- Overhead radiant heating device, one for day and one for night
- UVB-producing fluorescent light and fixture (for lizards and chelonians requiring UVB for calcium metabolism)
- Lamp timer to automate the day lights
- Power switch or outlet extender to provide enough outlets for the electrical equipment (need 2-4 outlets)
- Water bowl
- Feeding bowl or plate
- Food (if you have an insect eater, you may also need to set up housing and provide proper food and water for a couple of colonies of feeder insects); calculate monthly expenses, including anticipated increased based on your reptile's increased intake as it grows
- Multivitamin and calcium supplements
- Cleaning and disinfecting supplies (no, they are not the same thing...!)

Many people figure they can skimp on the enclosure size or delay in getting the equipment their animal needs. The problem is, the reptile needs the proper heating, lighting, substrate, food, etc., now ! All too often, owners find that they end up with a dead reptile. Or they may end up having to spend hundreds of dollars in veterinary expenses and the cost of the equipment they should have bought to begin with...and still their reptile may be too far gone to make it.

For veterinary expenses, check with the local herpetological society or wildlife rescue group to see who the good reptile vets are in your area, then call their offices. You don't need to actually talk to the vet as the office staff can tell you how much an initial exam for a new patient, a fecal flotation and worming medicine is (which is what you can expect to pay for any new reptile who is basically healthy but needs to be wormed).

If you can't save enough from your allowance, birthday gifts and after school jobs to not only get everything your reptile needs to start with, and to get all the replacements it is going to need (replacing burned out bulbs, vitamins, food supplies, substrate, cleaning/disinfecting supplies, annual replacement of the UVB tubes, etc.) in addition to what you are going to have to pay for the animal itself, and your parents are not willing to chip in or carry the full cost themselves, don't get it. It is not fair to the reptile to subject it to inadequate housing, food and care just because you desperately want to have it.

By the way, "do some research" doesn't mean posting on a newsgroup or message board or emailing someone demanding "tell me everything you know about [species] so my mom will let me have one" or "how much does a corn snake cost?" While the information and resources available through the Internet should be a part of your research, it should not, and cannot, if you are doing a thorough job, be the only resource you tackle in finding out everything you can about the care and keeping of the reptiles you are interested in.

### **Get your parents involved**

Ask your folks to attend herp society meetings with you. This will give both of you some time together to focus on other aspects of herpetology/herpetoculture, including finding and making use of local resources and meeting other herpers. This latter can be most effective as your folks will be able to meet other parents of kids your age and will be able to pick their brains - just as you will be able to pick the kids' brains. And, just in case your parents think all herpers are a buncha tattooed biker dope fiends, they will be pleasantly surprised to find that herpers come in all persuasions, representing both genders, all ages, backgrounds, and walks of

life. The herp society can also be great place to find locally bred reptiles.

### **Be adult: prepare to compromise**

Especially if it is your folks who will be providing the money for your reptile and its care! While all of your hard work and stick-to-it-iveness and research skills and powers of assimilation (putting all the facts and information you got together into a form that allowed you to start making some comparisons and decisions - see? and you didn't think you were learning anything important in school!) may have convinced your parents that you were mature and responsible enough for a reptile, the fact that they are going to be paying for some or all of it means that your decision on what to get is going to have to be tempered by what they will allow in the house.

As above, don't whine, wheedle, beg, or complain. Do it enough, and your folks just may change their minds! Instead, roll with their decision. Start off nice and slow. You may be one of the lucky ones whose reptiles grow on their parents, leading to more reptiles, like the ones you wanted to get to begin with, a year or more down the line.

### **Dealing with reality**

A big problem comes up when you go away for the weekend or longer. If your parents aren't willing to care for your animal of choice, don't get it. Unless, of course, you never plan on going to camp, off on a school trip, spend the night at a friend's house, or college! Even snakes need to be looked in on regularly and their enclosures cleaned. Just telling your folks to leave it till you get home isn't very practical, especially since many reptiles like to poop in their water bowl or on their food...

Remember that, even with all the research you did, and no matter how prepared you were for that reptile, it is still going to be a learning experience for you. You are going to need to learn how to adjust your own schedule and responsibilities to fit in the care your reptile needs, the handling sessions, cage cleaning days, getting food for it, monitoring the equipment to make sure it is working all right, etc.

Many reptiles should be handled regularly. Not only does it give them exercise they wouldn't ordinarily get in their enclosure, but it provides mental stimulation for them, too. Just think about how crazy you'd get if you had to stay in your room all day (with most of the fun stuff taken out, including radio, television, your computer and hand-held video games), day after day after day, week after week, month after month. That, unfortunately, is what happens to too many reptiles that kids get. Football or soccer or whatever season starts, practice starts taking up what time isn't spent eating, studying and kicking back with your friends, and pretty soon your reptile starts getting snappy or hissy when you finally think to go take it out for awhile, so you put it away again. Just as it isn't fair to the reptile to start out with anything less than the enclosure and equipment it needs, so too isn't it fair to leave many of them completely alone except for when you remember to feed, water and clean.

### **Plan for the future**

If you agree to be responsible for your reptile, including getting to the store to get food, and taking it to the vet, keep in mind that your choice of reptile needs to be limited to its eventual size. You can't exactly take a 10 ft boa or 5 ft lizard on the bus or bicycle to get to the vet, and bag of dead rats or rabbits slung over your book rack on the back of your bike may get a bit messy and smelly on your way home, and the live ones may eat their way out of the bag or box before you get there.

Planning on going away to college and living away from home? If you are planning on living in student housing with your reptile, you may need to think again. Most college and university dorms and student housing prohibit the keeping of any pets; some specifically prohibit reptiles, or certain reptiles. Think you can just sneak yours in? Read the fine print and think again. Housing facilities staff generally have the right to enter student rooms without the student present or any advance notification given. If you are renting a house or an apartment, landlords can do the same thing if there is something like leaky plumbing to be fixed. Think your friends won't rat you out? Think again...it just takes one ticked off friend or acquaintance to tell the wrong person that you have been hiding a 15 ft python in your closet. Too many students end up with very sick animals because they aren't able to provide the right environment, diet, or veterinary care for it, or are faced with finding a home for themselves or their reptile within 24 hours once the facilities staff finds out and gives notice of eviction.

### **Your folks still say no...**

Accept it. For now, at least. You can always try again next year, using the year in between to work on anything that needs to be worked on (proclaiming your maturity to your folks while whining, stamping your foot, and slamming the door probably isn't going to convince them that you are as mature as you say you are...!) In the meantime, you can still keep up with the reptile world, attending herp society meetings, reading herp magazines, participating in herp forums online. It is a good time to start putting aside some money regularly, saving up for when you will need it for your herp.

And, if worse comes to terrible, and your parents can't be swayed while you are living under their roof, don't despair. The time will come when you will be on your own, with all the joys and not-so-joys of maintaining your own household and vehicle, and earning your own money to pay for it all. Then you can indulge yourself and get that reptile you've always wanted. And, who knows? Having one then may be a great way to keep your folks from dropping in unexpectedly!