



## Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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# So, you think you want a reptile?

For parents, spouses, partners and anyone who wants, or knows someone who wants, a reptile...

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## **Preface**

I frequently get letters and phone calls from parents whose kids, and adults whose partners or spouses, want a reptile. I get even more letters and phone calls from parents whose kids (or spouses) went ahead and got a reptile without realizing the full implications what they were getting into. In many cases, the reptile they got was unsuitable for them; in too many cases, a reptile was unsuitable, period. These owners found, often too late, that the choosing and caring for reptiles is not as simple as it may appear.

## **The Alien Factor**

With most reptiles, we are attempting to keep an animal with very specific environmental and dietary needs in an environment very much unlike its native habitat. Owners must spend a great deal of time-and money-working to keep their reptile's enclosure warm enough or cool enough, and dry enough or humid enough, or the reptile will sicken and die. What works to provide the right temperatures and humidity during the summer may not be enough during the winter. During the spring and fall, the great disparity between ambient day time and night time temperatures makes almost daily fiddling with heating equipment a must. If you don't have the money to invest in the extensive heating and lighting equipment (and increased power bills) or the time to be monitoring temperatures day and night during much of the year that is a basic requirement of keeping most reptiles, then a less "alien" reptile should be considered.

## **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. This leaves the animal to languish in its enclosure, often for years, as one parent or the other tries to guilt the child (or spouse) into caring for it. Too often, these animals end up severely ill before anyone does anything about it (usually giving it away when they find that no one wants to buy it). Too many of these animals die from the neglect.

## **The Cool Factor**

The cooler-looking the reptile, the more it is likely to cost you, in time and money and space, to set up properly, quite apart from the cost of the reptile itself. The trick for a parent

who is working to get their child redirected to a more appropriate reptile is to learn as much as possible about the suitable reptiles. This usually means heading to the local herpetological society, World Wide Web, and [herpetological booksellers](#) to get information on how the animal lives and has adapted to its environment, as the books and information available in most pet stores will not cover this information.

### **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 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**

As discussed in the [Finding A Reptile Vet](#) article, not all vets are knowledgeable about reptile medicine. If you cannot find a reptile vet in your area, be prepared to widen your search, geographically. Unfortunately, just as there are no laws mandating that pet stores must know anything about the animals they sell, there is no law mandating that pet stores sell only those species for whom there are competent vets in the area who can examine and treat them. Compounding the problem are the people who buy exotics without first finding out if there are vets capable of treating them, and who then try to pass their sick animals off to other unsuspecting people once they realize that finding a qualified vet is going to take some effort - not to speak of money. If you live in a rural or otherwise less metropolitan area and decide to buy any type of exotic pet, you must commit to traveling the distances required to get your exotics to a vet trained in their treatment. Depending on where you live, that may entail trips of one or more hours. In some parts of Canada and the U.S., some herp keepers drive 5 or more hours - one way - to see their vet. If you aren't prepared to go the distance, don't get the pet.

### **Basic Considerations**

Okay. You have successfully dealt with the above factors and have decided that a reptile will be suitable for your family. But, which one is best for you?

Reptiles are not all alike and, as prospective owners, we need to understand some things about ourselves before we can even think about what reptile to get. Ask yourself the following questions, and then we can narrow the field down:

#### **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), and initial veterinary care. For example, that \$10 iguana will actually cost you \$250 or more (depending on where you live and the availability of the necessary lighting and heating equipment, foods, and

veterinarians); 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 (see [Calculating the Cost of Electricity](#)).

### **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 not only causes severe stress which leads to illness and behavioral problems - it also makes taming and working with territorial species that much more difficult. 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, such as iguanas and large pythons and boas, there are no commercially made enclosures big enough for these animals, and much of what is available is not the right shape for them. 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; the large Zoophobas ("kingworms") should be killed by quickly crushing their heads before being fed out...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 one 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 a 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.

In some countries in which green iguanas, desert iguanas, Uromastyx, and prehensile-tailed skinks (all herbivorous lizards) are sold, the foods they need to be fed regularly are difficult, or impossible, to find. As with carnivore food products, the commercially available foods for herbivores are not appropriate replacements for a properly constructed fresh food diet.

Does an herbivore still sound good to you? Unfortunately, there are no herbivorous snakes, and the herbivorous lizards are amongst the hardest and most demanding of all to keep.

### **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) fluorescent tubes that need to be replaced every 6-12 months.

A cost generally not taken into consideration is the cost of providing heating and lighting to all reptiles, but especially desert and tropical species. While there is some respite during the winter for desert species owners, tropical species must be maintained at tropical temperatures all year round. To get an idea of what your prospective reptile may cost you, see the information on [Calculating the Cost of Electricity](#).

### **Suitable Starters**

What criteria do I use in deciding what is a suitable starter reptile? I look at the ease of keeping it (note: this may still entail more work, time, money or space than you personally are willing to devote to it), moderate size (8 in - 4 ft), and ease in taming (note: parents must do the taming--not the child--and must oversee all interactions between child and reptile even when the reptile is very tame.)

No matter what you are told by someone trying to sell you a reptile or what you read in the too many outdated books still being sold in stores and stocked on library shelves, no reptile is easy enough to care for to be left strictly to a child to care for. Your child cannot be expected to get himself to the pet store or hardware store for food and supplies, nor to place orders with mail-order suppliers. Too many reptiles die because the light went out or got unplugged, or it was forced to go "just one more day" without water or food.

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 who 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.

## **Lizards**

### [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, 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.

### [Collared Lizard](#)

Diurnal desert dwellers that can be set up as the leopard gecko, but must be in a larger enclosure, at least a 55-60 gallon. 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 - fluorescents can do). Largely carnivorous, adults will eat some plant matter. Most in stores are wild-caught. To 10-12 inches.

### Bearded Dragon

Diurnal desert dweller, to be set up as the collared. Babies are cheap but that's because they have a lower survival rate. Buy one at least 6 inches long - big enough to start eating mouse pinks. Smaller bearded dragons 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. 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 omnivores, 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 awhile during clement weather, and by providing a UVB fluorescent during the winter months. 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-70s to mid-80s 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. To 4 feet. Good climbers, they need large, well secured enclosures.

## Snakes

### Corn Snake

Corn snakes are the easily the most domesticated of all snakes and widely available as captive bred. They also come in a remarkably wide variety of colors. Hatchlings are barely bigger than a pencil but are active feeders (and poopers). They be a little skitty 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 eaters and can be easily converted to feeding on defrosted prey. Temperatures need to range from the-70s to 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

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. Most stores are selling imports - whether they were wild caught snakes or hatched from wild collected eggs is immaterial: they do not recognize mice as being food, they are heavily parasitized and stressed, and an increasing number are infected and dying from inclusion body disease. Since beginners (and even many intermediate) herpers cannot tell a good store from a bad one, and even herp specialty stores are selling sick and wild caught ball pythons, I recommend you do not buy them from a store, period. Buy only from a breeder to whom you can go back to for assistance. This means not buying one from those folks selling cheap ones at expos. If you buy a healthy captive bred one who is feeding well (ask to see it being fed - too many people have ended up with non-feeding ball pythons after being assured by the store or expo vendor that "it just ate"), then you will have a wonderful snake - all the fun of the large pythons without the bulk or size or potential for harm.

### Unsuitable Starter Reptiles

I consider these unsuitable for children-and many adults-for a variety of reasons. This is not to say that they are not suitable for some people. Some are not handleable, some have very complex needs, some rarely become tame, many are available only as wild caught specimens which means that they are not in great health to start with...

### Lizards

Herbivorous lizards, those who eat nothing but vegetation, on the whole get very large, ranging from 3-6 feet with in the first 1-3 years, depending upon species. It is because of their large body size and the temperatures found in their native habitat (all are desert, neotropical or tropical lizards) that they have been able to succeed as herbivores. Due to their size and environmental needs, not to speak of the power in their bites and tails, herbivores are more difficult to care for than omnivorous lizards. Some are only available if you catch them in the wild: [chuckawallas and desert iguanas](#) are not being bred much in captivity. [Green iguanas](#) rapidly reach 5-6 feet in overall length and take a great deal of work to tame - so much so that they often defeat adults and should never be left to children to care for and tame. The [Uromastyx](#), also called spiny-tailed, or dab lizards, currently available in pet stores are for the most part wild-caught imports and are highly parasitized and stressed. Until such time as captive breeding is up to speed (or unless you can find a captive breeder now) these should be passed on for now.

Other unsuitable lizards, given the degree of care, hardiness, tame-ability, aggressiveness or delicacy:

[Agamas](#) - there are many different species being imported - getting accurate species identification and finding proper care information is often difficult

[Ameivas](#), aka Junglerunners, Dwarf Tegus

[Anoles](#), often miscalled "chameleons," they lack the prehensile tail and turret eyes of the

true chameleons

Basilisks

Chameleons

Day Geckos (*Phelsuma* species)

Dwarf Tegu (see *Ameiva*)

Green Iguanas and other iguanids such as spiny-tailed iguanas, crested or helmeted iguanas, "forest chameleons"

Mountain Dragons

Monitors, other than Savannahs

Tegus (Lansdown; AI)

Tokay Geckos

Tree Dragons

Sailfin Dragon

Spiny-tailed Iguanas (aka black iguanas)

*Uromastyx* \* See Note

Water Dragons

\* Note: Since this article was written, *Uromastyx* breeders have, well, multiplied like their lizards. If you buy from a good captive breeder and if you will commit to maintaining these lizards at the hot desert temperatures they require, and if you don't mind the scratching or poking of the claws and the spiked tail, then this lizard may be worth a try for *some* beginners.

## **Snakes**

Generally speaking, any snake that requires two or more people to handle it when it is barely half grown isn't a good idea for beginners. That eliminates all boas and pythons but the very small ones (those that are less than six feet when full grown).

Anacondas - combine huge size and nasty temperament in a powerful body

**Burmese pythons** - huge and generally nice, but involved in increasing numbers of human fatalities due to owner stupidity

Hognose - while generally nice and docile, they are rear fanged and mildly venomous; the easterns only eat toads

Rainbow boa - a sweet moderately sized boa with very critical humidity requirements

Red-tail boas - not as huge as anacondas, Burmese or reticulated pythons, but, based on the increasing numbers being dumped on rescues, even 10 feet is too much for some people

Reticulated pythons - see anaconda

Any tree boa or python - many tend to have very specific humidity and dietary needs, and with their testy temperament and very long, bird-snagging teeth, can deliver a painful bite

Water snakes (exception: some garters are okay, but require live fish) - tend to be testy and finding and maintaining the proper water pH can be a problem

Wild caught garter, kings, gophers, etc. - many are difficult to feed on what we have to offer them in captivity, and in most places it is illegal to capture wild birds and mammals to feed them

### **Turtles And Tortoises (Chelonians)**

All of them. Chelonians are not good handling animals and are much more complicated in their set up and care than pet stores will tell you. Different species have very specific environmental and dietary requirements that must be met. Most sold in the pet trade are wild caught and so are suffering from internal and external parasites, respiratory and shell infections.

### **In closing...**

If I sound negative at times, it is because I am. 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 into, relying on inaccurate care information (including that provided by most pet stores), and not being able to afford the necessary equipment, upkeep and veterinary care (assuming that the basic equipment required is actually available in the country in which the reptile is sold).

Of all the animals kept in captivity, reptiles are the only ones who do not typically reach their normal lifespan. In captivity, most animals should live to-or exceed-their expected natural life span due to the improved conditions (regular feeding, veterinary care, etc.) and lack of predators. That this doesn't happen with reptiles is a tragic commentary on how poorly we understand and provide for these animals. If the pet trade were itself fully knowledgeable, if the people selling reptiles were honest about what it takes to properly house and maintain reptiles they sell and about the reptiles' eventual size and temperament, the reptile trade would not be the multi-million dollar business it currently is...

If reptiles were as cool and easy to 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, box turtles). They generally call me after they have found that no one has beat down their doors trying to buy their reptile, and that the pet stores or breeders from whom they originally bought their animal, and zoos and

wildlife educators and refuges don't have any more room for cast-off pets. Others are shocked by not being able to find a vet who will treat their severely ill reptile for free, or that there isn't anyone else out there who will pay for the necessary care for them. Besides the 20-30 iguanas a year I take in and try to find homes for (something that has become increasingly difficult as there are more people buying them than are actually capable of and willing to care for them properly), I have taken in or otherwise rescued: gopher snakes, ball pythons, Burmese pythons, red-tail boas and corn snakes; savannah monitors, gold tegus; bearded dragons, leopard geckos, tokay geckos, water dragons, and sailfin lizards; box turtles, tortoises, and aquatic turtles; and assorted amphibians. Most are suffering from some form of neglect and many are moderately to severely ill. Most come from people who never thought beyond merely buying the animal and sticking it in a (generally too small) enclosure.

Reptiles are not things. They are living, breathing, feeling (yes, they do feel pain and suffer from the effects of stress) animals, with the same basic emotions, nerve structure and needs that the so-called higher animals have. Whether they live only a couple of years or 150 years, they require the same commitment to their care and well-being as does any animal.

Reptiles are not stuffed toy animals you can just stick away in a garage because someone in the family thinks reptiles are icky, or because everyone's lost interest in it. Reptiles do not belong in garages, just as cars don't belong in the bedroom or family room. Sticking an intelligent reptile, such as a green iguana, in a garage is nothing less than cruel and inhumane. For some idea of what it is like being shunted away from family activities, or forced to spend your life in a cage way too small just because the humans refuse to provide you the space you need to ensure your health, please read my article, [Imagine: A Visualization Exercise](#).

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

If you take away nothing else from this article, please consider this: do not get, nor agree to letting your child (or spouse or significant other) get, any animal that you are not willing to care for, provide for and support entirely for the rest of its natural life. Because all too often, that is exactly what you will be faced with...

### **Still thinking about it...?**

Before buying a reptile from a pet store, expo, or breeder, be sure to check out the lists of [herp societies and reptile rescue groups](#) for information on reptiles that may be available for adoption and to meet and talk to keepers of species you may be interested in getting. The various herp [email discussion lists](#) are also a good place to get the views and experiences of other keepers before you get a reptile. Whenever possible, select previously owned animals who need a new home, or buy a captive bred one.