



Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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Taming and Training Reptiles FAQ

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Introduction

This FAQ is being compiled in response to many postings regarding the intelligence and tameability of various groups and species of reptiles. It is organized as a loosely ordered collection of questions and answers. If you have experiences, corrections, or opinions you would like to see added, please, send your [email to me](#), and your comments will most certainly be incorporated.

Can reptiles become tame?

Short answer: YES. Long answer: Most will, some won't. Reptiles have not been bred for gentle temperament, even though some heavily captive bred species, like corn snakes, seem mellower than wild caught specimens.

Some species/individuals are more likely to get used to than others. Some species/individuals will get non-shy and eat from your hand but will never let you touch them. Some species/individuals will tolerate handling in return for food, others will hate it. Some species/individuals will run, others will bite...and some will be really tame and develop a taste for having their neck scratched.

When buying a reptile, if you want it to become tame, buy an animal that seems calm and friendly. Unless you are prepared to invest a lot of time and effort without promise of success, don't go for the more 'challenging' animal.

Some species start out friendly as babies and will develop a rotten temper when they get older. Reticulated Pythons have that reputation. But several people state, that some reticulated pythons are very well tempered, and that maybe they become less mellow not so much as a character trait, but because they are handled less when they get large.

Some species, no matter how tame, can become dangerous when they get bigger. They can hurt you, when they get angry or scared. And they can potentially kill you, if they mistake you for food.

No matter how tame your animal gets, expect to get bitten or scratched, occasionally, if the animal is upset or scared. Use tongs for biters, and gloves.

Remember: ALL REPTILES ARE WILD ANIMALS. Treat them as such, and you can avoid trouble.

Do reptiles like to be petted?

Some do, some don't. I know several boas who love to be petted, even on their head, after they develop a taste for it. And that is the key: many reptiles don't take naturally to being petted. But once they get used to it, they often start to like it.

Many snakes will like to cuddle in warm, dark places, like T-shirts. If your idea of petting is an animal curled up on your stomach inside your shirt while you are reading a book, then a snake is a good pet for you.

Turtles and tortoises are not cuddly, but many like their belly scratched, i.e. the bottom of their plastron, and they will definitely express their pleasure. "I had a chance to pet some young Galapagos tortoises in June. They go off to Never-Never Land if you scratch the jaws and neck."

How do I know, my animal likes to be petted?

Your animal likes to be petted if:

- it does not run away given the option
- does not try to avoid your touch
- goes to sleep in your arms
- stays around for more if you stop
- visibly relaxes as you go
- doesn't hiss or bite

How smart are snakes?

VERY stupid! They animals they eat are a lot smarter than they are (provided they are alive). They can learn certain associations, though. Most notably, if you always drop food into the cage, the snake will associate opening the cage with the coming food and eventually bite the first thing that comes in when the lid opens, including your hand.

How smart are turtles and tortoises?

A lot smarter than snakes. Turtles can learn a lot of little things and routines, given enough time and food rewards.

Turtles are creatures of habit - they don't like change at all. If they live in a stable environment, they will learn where to get food and that it comes from the refrigerator, where their water dish is, where their favorite pooping place is (and you can put paper there), and that you are the source of good things. The latter can result in a turtle that will follow you around the room or the yard in order to coax you into scratching its head or giving it food.

One person informed me, that his Wood Turtles are potty trained, will walk up to the refrigerator if they are hungry, and go to the bathroom and sit in front of the tub until they get the bath they desire.

All my water turtles know that food comes from the kitchen, and they also can discern fingers from food quite easily, if they want to. I believe, some turtles have a concept of fun/play, i.e. doing something of no practical value because it gives them pleasure or entertainment. (Ever tried to play Submarine with your Slider ?) "Henry learned that the nozzle on the garden hose will be either bright orange or bright yellow. After a while, I started leaving the hose running a little, so he could drink when he wanted to."

How smart are lizards?

It depends on the species. Anoles and most geckos are not very smart at all. Others, such as some iguanas, are quite intelligent, and some monitors are very smart -- almost as smart as, say, a parakeet.

Igs seem to be reasonably intelligent. de Vosjoli, in the Green Iguana Manual, relates the story of a herpetologist for a major zoo who once saw an iguana hit a tree with its tail, and two pieces of fruit fell off. Then another iguana ran up and ate both pieces. The first iguana bit the second on the foot, and the second ig ran away. This, he said, was the most intelligent thing he'd ever seen an iguana do.

Iguanas can definitely learn through experience and recognize simple cause and effect relationships. It takes time and patience, but several people have reported success with leash training and potty training (always put the iguana in the same spot to do it, and eventually it'll do it when put in that spot).

Do reptiles recognize individuals?

Definitely, but not all to the same extent. It is well known that turtles and tortoises distinguish between people. Snakes that get mostly and often handled by the same person will recognize that person and prefer him/her over others.

And Nile monitors are used as 'watch-lizards' in some parts of Africa, as they learn to recognize the person who feeds them.

What do I do if I get bit ? Does it hurt?

Depending on the size of the teeth and the animal it will hurt, bleed, and be a mess.

All of us have been bitten. It comes with the hobby. Disinfect the wound, get stitches if necessary, and do not make a big deal of it, especially not to your doctor. Or do you want legislation forbidding your pet because it bit one person? (Never mind that no-one thinks of outlawing dogs or cats because they bite and scratch).

Do not blame anyone else, when you get bitten, not even if it is someone else's animal. If you get bit, it is usually your fault or nobody's fault. Never sue a store, if their pets bite you - you wanted to hold their animal in the first place, didn't you ?

Sometimes a snake tooth will be lost, when it bites. This is a normal part of life. If one is left embedded in your skin, treat it as a splinter, though a tooth usually comes out easier than most splinters. Reptiles are physiologically incapable of having rabies, a definite advantage over dogs and cats.

Most turtle bites are pinches and will not draw blood. Larger tortoises can have a good bite, though. Especially small children's soft hands should be kept in a safe distance. (It is a myth, that a snapping turtle can bite a person's foot off.) The most unpleasant part of being bitten by a turtle is, often, to get the animal off. Turtles will clamp tightly, and they are good at it!

My reptile is skittish. How do I tame it?

With a lot of patience.

Once the animal tolerates you walking by the cage, changing the water bowl, feeding, and cleaning, you can try and touch it gently or even catch and hold it. If you pay attention to your animal, you will learn when it is comfortable and when not.

Start out slowly; you do not want to frighten the animal from the beginning! Start by holding it for a few minutes at a time, a few times a day, and just picking it up, not holding and restraining it. When (and if!) it has gotten to the point that it doesn't try to run away after you pick it up, try taking it out of the cage and actually holding it. It will probably squirm or try to get away; restrain it *gently* until it calms down, hold it a few seconds longer, and then place it back in the cage. The idea is to get it through its small brain that being held is not preparatory to being eaten!

How do I know, the animal likes me or what I am doing?

The Hypothalamus is the part of the brain where most of our emotions come from. All reptiles have one, so they have feelings. Since they cannot talk, we don't know for sure, what feelings they have beyond the most basic ones.

The most basic emotions are fear, aggression, and pleasure. I don't think anyone will argue, that reptiles don't have these feelings and express them. They avoid what they fear, attack what makes them angry, and seek out what is pleasurable.

If you create an environment that is comfortable and pleasant, and you do things to your pet that make it feel comfortable and pleased, then the reptile will 'like' you in the sense that good things come from you, and therefore it wants to be with you.

In general, you will know quickly, if you do something your reptile does not like: it will try to get away or even bite.

Whether reptiles have more complex feelings, like 'liking', is a hard question, and I would give a guarded 'yes' for chelonians, but I don't know about others. In order to like someone, the animal has to distinguish between people and clearly prefer some over others. Chelonians do tell people apart, and they prefer some people over others. I noticed to my surprise, that there are people my friendly snake does not like for no reason I can make out.

One person relates that he has a very social turtle: When he reads a book on the floor, the turtle comes by and climbs on his back. He'll sit there for up to 15 minutes.

Make up your own mind, and you are probably right ...

How do I potty train my reptile?

In general, you can't potty train the animal. It will train you. Many reptiles follow a daily routine which also includes eliminating. Just put paper where the animal usually does it and you should be fine most of the time.

There are exceptions and stories, though: Supposedly, water monitors can be litter trained, and Leopard Geckos tend to use the same part of their cage all the time. Many reptiles also show a strong preference for eliminating into their water dishes.

How often should I handle my animal?

The more the better, but not so much that the animal does not get to sleep or eat. Especially new animals should be left alone for the first few days or weeks, until they develop a rhythm and eat well. Then handle for a short time maybe twice a day. Watch the animal. If it is too stressed, reduce handling.

Of course, to tame the animal, you do have to expose it to some stress. Before you start the taming, make sure your animal is well-fed and settled in. Then a few days of unsettling won't be harmful.

Should I buy a nippy or shy animal, if I want to end up with a tame one ?

NO.

Can snakes learn to do tricks?

NO. Yes. Maybe. One reader taught his snake to come to him, when she pats the ground.

Can turtles learn to do tricks?

YES. Just use your imagination, time, and treats.

Can lizards learn to do tricks?

Not really. Many will learn to eat from your hand, or lounge around on your body, but that's about it.

Can I make my animal stay in the yard?

No. Reptiles generally come and go as they please. A good fence will keep turtles and tortoises in.

Can I put my reptile on a leash and go for walks with it?

Some lizards can be trained to walk on a leash. I have heard of iguanas and Savannah Monitors being able to do this. You would use a cat or rabbit harness for the purpose.

Turtles and tortoises should never have their shells perforated in order to tie them to a leash! Not only do they not understand the concept of a leash, the damaged shell can get infected. Also, the shell is live bone, and the procedure is not pleasant for the turtle, to say the least.

So, which reptiles are known to tame easily?

Note: There are individual differences even within the species. I have 2 corn snakes. One is as tame as they get, and I can do anything I want to him, the other one is shy and hates to be touched, even though she recognizes me very well. There are always exceptions!

- Corn snakes and most other rat snakes
- King Snakes
- Milk Snakes (most colubrids are fine)
- Boa constrictors
- Red eared sliders
- Snapping turtles (but large ones have a nasty bite).
- Iguanas
- Ball pythons
- Some monitors, like Savannah Monitors, but it takes time
- Burmese Pythons (But they get big, which makes handling harder, and an adult can harm a person. Not ideal cuddling pets!)
- American species of box turtles

Which reptiles tend to stay shy?

Note: There are individual differences even within the species. So, if you have a tame Emerald Tree Boa, I envy you! There are always exceptions!

- Racers
- Vine Snakes
- Most small lizards
- D`Albert pythons
- Tokay Geckos
- Basilisks

Which reptiles tend to be aggressive?

- Green Tree Pythons
- Emerald Tree Boas and other species of tree boas (big teeth!)
- Anacondas, especially green ones
- Some Monitors, like the Nile Monitor
- Reticulated Pythons, can be bad tempered, but several people told me about theirs being tame and friendly. Definitely not a beginner's animal, though.

Which reptiles are not recommended for the general public?

- Gila Monsters (venomous and illegal)
- Rattle Snakes (can be tame and gentle, but one bite is enough)
- Any front-fanged venomous snake
- Crocodiles and Alligators (though there are reports of tameability for Muggers and some other crocodylians if raised from infancy).
- Komodo Dragons
- Horned toads (they become tame but eat mostly ants)