New Pets: Are Reptiles Right for You?

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Properly cared-for, reptiles can make excellent pets. As you consider buying a snake, lizard, amphibian, or other herp (reptiles and amphibians), there are a number of things you should understand about their unique needs in habitat, nutrition, temperature, and lighting. Here's a brief primer for making your herp's home both healthy and comfortable:

1. **Accommodation needs (habitat/husbandry)**

In addition to the initial and ultimate size of your pet's home, you need to consider how the home needs to be set up. Cages or vivariums need to be escape-proof. This is necessary not just for your own safety, but for the physical and emotional well-being of your pet. Herp homes have to provide enough space for mobility within an environment similar to the one that the animal might inhabit in the wild, without dangers introduced by chemicals or other household hazards. You also need to consider factors like cleaning, sanitizing, and routine maintenance, so you may wish to have two containers or environments.

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2. Feeding and nutrition needs

There are commercially available diets for some herbivorous herps, but almost all will need their diets supplemented with fresh foods. Before you purchase any herp, be certain that you can afford not only to feed it, but that you will continue to do so happily. Some carnivorous herps must be fed live food, and this is an important consideration when you are thinking about buying such an animal. Even purchasing live worms, brine shrimp, water fleas, or crickets is far from inexpensive. Raising your own live food species can save you money, but you will still incur expense in dusts or gut-loader products to ensure that the live foods provide the proper nutrition for your pet. Most herps will also need or benefit from supplements.

3. Temperature needs

Being cold-blooded, a captive reptile does not have the luxury of maintaining its body temperature within the range that it requires on its own. It has to rely on you to provide an environment that allows it to stay healthy. Most snakes, for example, will not eat if the temperature falls more than a few degrees below optimum. If they do eat when the temperature is too cool, they cannot digest their food properly and health problems can result.

Most snakes need temperatures between 80º and 88ºF, but depending on the animal, the optimum range may well lie within only two to four degrees. Ideally, providing a temperature gradient in the environment allows the herp to move from place to place as it needs to warm up by basking, or cool down. Also, in the wild, herps are used to having the temperature drop from 5 to 20 degrees at night. Millions of years of evolution cannot be wiped out in the course of a year or two of breeding, so this is still a requirement. Some reptiles, kept at a constant temperature, will eventually develop stress and may die. For many species, a time-controlled programmable thermostat that changes from day to night will help to ensure that your pet stays healthy.

Depending on the animal that you select, you will need to have the money

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required to purchase and maintain equipment to adequately control the temperature. And you will need to pay the additional monthly electric or gas bills involved in running them. At minimum, you need a good thermometer and proper lighting (that serves as a heat source). Then, depending on the pet and its sensitivity, you may need specialized heating equipment like nocturnal heat lamps, basking lights, under-tank-heaters, or radiant terrarium heaters, etc.

4. **Lighting needs**

   Light, like temperature, is something that is programmed into your herp through millennia of evolution.

   Light provides your pets with specific vitamins for mineral metabolism. It also creates an environment that caters to the animals' very nature; some herps are nocturnal, while others are diurnal. Within that general definition, tropical species will often need constant 12-hour cycles of day and night, while species from more temperate regions are accustomed to more fluctuation in the day/night cycle, ranging from 16 hours of darkness in winter to 8 hours of darkness in summer.

   For many herps, a light source can be used both for light and heating. A full spectrum fluorescent bulb can be fitted to the top of the vivarium, or onto an overhead fixture for vitamin and mineral metabolism with an incandescent bulb added for light and heat. The higher the wattage, the higher the temperature. Ceramic heat emitters require a ceramic socket because of the temperature at the base of the emitter. However, for species that require darkness with higher ambient temperatures than your room temperature, additional heating is necessary at night. For these species, making a careful choice from the beginning will ensure that your pet and your pocketbook both stay healthy.

5. **Humidity needs**

   As with temperature and lighting, reptiles in the wild are accustomed to locations with fairly stable humidity. They control that humidity by burrowing, or moving to a microclimate that meets their needs within their environment. Captive animals cannot do that.

   A snake or lizard kept in too dry an environment will develop health problems. On the less serious side, it may shed poorly; more seriously, it can develop kidney failure and die. Conversely, too much humidity can lead to problems with fungus, bacteria, and blister disease.

   Depending on the animal's needs, you will need to provide a means to regulate the humidity in your pet's home. In some cases, this will mean providing a full vivarium setup complete with aquatic water filtration in part of the tank, and a dry "terrarium" setup in the other portion. You may

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need to install misting equipment, drippers, or foggers. Or your needs may be as simple as providing a standard humidifier in a large enclosure, a humidity "retreat" filled with damp moss, or a large, shallow dish of water. In a pinch, for some herps, spraying the environment from a bottle when the humidity occasionally drops too low may also be an option. And, of course, if your pet is sensitive to humidity, a good humidity alert device is an absolute requirement.

Just as the equipment involved in keeping a herp can range from minimal to monumental depending upon the herp, so can the amount of time and attention that is required. In addition to careful monitoring, you must also be prepared for emergencies such as equipment failure, illness, stress, and general difficulty in keeping and handling.

We Recommend

Exo-Terra Glass Terrarium has a specially designed, easy-turning lock to prevent escapes, and the doors can be opened separately.

Coralife Power Centers control terrarium systems simultaneously

Digital Thermometer is ideal for terrarium temperature monitoring.

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