Naturalistic Terrariums, How to Create

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Though artificial habitats are easier to set up and maintain, a naturalistic habitat will be far better for your herp if you can do it correctly. Replicating your herp's natural environment as closely as possible has a number of benefits, both physical and psychological, for your herp, and it is well worth the time and effort you put into it.

Benefits

Recreating your herp's natural environment provides environmental enrichment that is lacking in a simple enclosure with just a few accessories in it. It promotes natural behavior and contributes to normal activity levels, as it encourages your reptile to interact with its environment by climbing, hiding, burrowing, or performing other activities that he would in the wild.

A naturalistic terrarium will also help keep your reptiles healthy. Reptiles are very susceptible to stress related illnesses, and one of the main causes of stress in reptiles is improper housing. Researching your reptile's habitat requirements and setting up an enclosure that mimics his natural environment will greatly reduce stress, which will keep him healthier.

Housing your herp in a naturalistic environment will also encourage proper eating and sleeping habits. Reptiles that are housed improperly or that aren't stimulated enough by their environment will often suffer from a decreased appetite or refuse food altogether. Failing to provide the right accessories and lighting will alter their photoperiods, disrupting their sleep patterns. Setting up a naturalistic terrarium will help your reptiles will eat properly as well as follow their natural waking and sleeping cycles.

Knowing What Setup to Use

Habitat requirements are naturally going to differ between species, some only a little, some drastically. A herp that is native to the rainforest or other tropical area is going to have vastly different housing needs than a herp native to the desert. This is why it is so important for you to research your herp's needs **before** bringing hmim

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home.

Look at pictures of his natural environment, note the natural plant life growing there. Research what the high and low temperatures are and how humid it gets. What food does he eat? How does a wild specimen find food? All of these things and more will help you to figure out which setup your herp will need.

The time you invest in researching your reptile's needs will ensure that he will be as healthy as possible, and it can greatly extend your reptile's life span. It is estimated that 90% of reptiles die within the first year, due mostly to improper housing. Spending time determining what your reptile's ideal habitat is can not only keep him happier and healthier, it can save his life.

Different Types of Habitats and Environments

You should always consider the needs of your herp and what kind of ecosystem he is native to when setting up the habitat, choosing accessories, and making any housing decisions. For example, Leopard Geckos are nocturnal, so they would need lots of hiding spots where they can find shelter during the daytime. Green Iguanas are arboreal, so they need a tall enclosure with lots of branches, shelves, and other perches for climbing and resting.

Different types of habitats that a herp would need include:

Aquatic:	These habitats consist almost entirely of water, generally with a small land area for basking or resting. Water temperature will vary by species. An example of an aquatic species is the Paddletail Newt.
Semi-Aquatic:	These habitats are split between land and water, and the ratio will depend on the species. Semi-aquatic species include salamanders, newts, frogs, and some turtles.
Arboreal:	These habitats are needed for reptiles that spend a good portion of their time in trees. They are generally taller than they are wide to provide lots of vertical climbing space. An example of an arboreal species is the Water Dragon.
Fossorial:	These habitats must contain lots of substrate that is suitable for digging and burrowing. An example of a fossorial species is the Sand Boa.

Herps are found all over the world, in a myriad of different climates and ecological systems. Different types of environments that reptiles come from include:

Tropical:	These ecosystems are generally very warm and moist. An example of a tropical species is the Amazon Tree Boa.
Desert:	These ecosystems are very dry with low humidity and high temperatures. An example of a desert species is the Bearded Dragon.

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Temperate: These ecosystems are not as extreme as the other ones, and the species that come from them are often easier to care for as a result. An example of a temperate species is the Leopard Frog.

Products You Can Use to Create a Naturalistic Terrarium

There are a wide variety of products available today to make your reptile's environment as natural as possible. Some of these items aren't necessarily associated with this task, such as lighting equipment and heating equipment. But lighting and heating products are just as important as what you put in the enclosure. Without proper temperatures and photoperiods, all the natural looking accessories you put in the enclosure are useless.

Additional products you can use to create a natural feel in your herp's habitat include:

- Floating Turtle Log - acts as a floating platform for sunning; provides underwater openings for hiding
- Artificial background and base plants - provide hiding spots and sightline breaks; reduce stress; hide wires, filter tubes, and other elements
- Nature Zone Reptile Vines - creates climbing space and hiding spots for arboreal and semi-arboreal herps
- Driftwood - provides climbing and hiding spots; anchors plants
- OSI Marine Tree Stumps - creates shelter, hiding spots, and a sense of security for aquatic herps
- Decorative ReptoFilter - filters and aerates water; provides climbing spots
- Exo-Terra Waterfall - encourages natural drinking behavior; maintains appropriate humidity levels

Other products include natural looking feeders such as the Exo Terra Feeding Dish, Fluker's Corner Bowls, Decorative Feeders & Waterers, and Fluker's Castle Cribs that contain water, food, and feeder insects without detracting from the naturalistic setup.

Live plants can also contribute greatly to a naturalistic environment, but using live plants can be tricky. Some herps will eat them, which can create more waste, so you have to be sure to use a high quality filter system and clean regularly. All plants must be thoroughly washed to remove all traces of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Any plants that will remain in pots must be repotted.

Additionally, your herp isn't going to know which plants are poisonous, especially if the plants you use aren't native to its environment. Always check to make sure a plant is safe before putting it in the enclosure. Some edible plants include:

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- Carnations (flowers)
- Dahlia (flowers)
- Dandelion (flowers, leaves)
- Day lilies (flowers)
- Ficus (leaves)
- Geranium (flowers, leaves)
- Hibiscus (flowers)
- Hollyhock (flowers, leaves)
- Impatiens (flowers)
- Maple (leaves)
- Mesquite (leaves)
- Mulberry (leaves)
- Nasturtiums (flowers, leaves)
- Petunias
- Phlox
- Yucca (flowers)

If you aren't sure about the plant you're considering adding to the habitat, don't use it. The reaction to a non-edible plant can range from vomiting to death, depending on the toxicity of the plant.

Naturalistic terrariums are highly beneficial to your herp, but they are going to take slightly more work on your part to set up. However, there are many rewards for you as well as for your herp, and your time will be well spent!

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