

Snake Habitats, How to Create

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Owning a snake is a major commitment, one that should not be entered into lightly. Housing a snake can be a very difficult task, especially with those species that can grow to be 500 lbs. Before you consider bringing a snake into your home, it is important that you know how you will have to house your snake. Different species of snakes will have their own specific habitat requirements, but there are some general requirements that you should know about so you can properly care for your snake.

Choosing a Cage

If you are going to keep a smaller species, such as garter snakes, you will be able to use a fairly small terrarium. However, there are some species that can grow to be more than 30 feet long, and they will need custom-built enclosures. There are basically three sizes that most snakes can be grouped into. They are:

- **10 - 20 gallon terrarium:**
garter snakes, grass snakes
- **30 - 55 gallon terrarium:**
king snakes, rat snakes, milk snakes, gopher snakes, other colubrids
- **Require custom-built enclosure:**
boa constrictors, pythons

You can build your own enclosure out of plywood and melamine if you are handy, or you can purchase one. Make sure that whatever cage you choose or build has a very secure lid to prevent your snake from escaping as well as proper ventilation and air circulation. Always keep in mind that your snake is going to grow very fast, so what seems sufficient for a python hatchling will soon not be.

Heating

The temperature of your snake's environment is very important for his overall health. Different species will have different temperature requirements, but all of them require a temperature gradient that varies throughout the cage. Snakes thermoregulate their body temperatures by moving into warm areas when they need to raise their body temperature and into cooler areas when they need to lower it. Therefore, there should be a hot side for basking and a cooler side. Always monitor cage temperatures with a [thermometer](#).

Primary heat sources are used to maintain the temperature of the entire habitat, and they can include a series of [incandescent lights](#) during the day, nocturnal reptile [incandescent lights](#) at night, under the tank [heaters and mats](#), and [ceramic heat emitters](#). If the enclosure is very large, you can use a space heater outside it to help maintain cage temperatures.

Secondary heat sources are used to create a hotter temperature in one area of the habitat, the basking area. It should cover 25% to 30% of the cage, and it should be turned off at night. Secondary heat sources can include 50 to 75 watt incandescent bulbs and [basking lights](#). You can also help to create a hot spot by using an under-the tank-heater on just one side of the enclosure. Never use hot rocks as a heat source - your snake can burn himself on them.

Here are the temperature requirements for some popular pet snakes:

- **Ball Python:**
77° - 85°F day, 69° - 75°F night, 90°F basking area
- **Milk Snake:**
78° - 82°F day, 65° - 70°F night, 84° - 88°F basking area
- **Amazon Tree Boa:**
80° - 85°F day, 75° - 78°F night, 90°F basking area
- **Red-Tailed Boa:**
82° - 90°F day, 78° - 85°F night, 90° - 95°F basking area
- **Burmese Python:**
85° - 88°F day, 78° - 80°F night, 90°F basking area

Lighting

Snakes generally need 12 hours of light followed by 12 hours of darkness in a 24 hour period. They require two types of lighting in their cages - light that provides heat, such as incandescent bulbs, and [full spectrum fluorescent lights](#) to supply UVB and UVA light. UVB light promotes Vitamin D3 synthesis, and Vitamin D3 allows their bodies to properly metabolize vitamins and minerals. Both types of lights should be turned off at night unless they are special nocturnal bulbs that emit almost no light.

When choosing incandescent bulbs, consider the wattage of the bulbs you are purchasing. High wattage bulbs will produce more heat and raise the temperature of the enclosure.

Humidity

Appropriate humidity levels vary widely by species. Some snakes, such as boa constrictors, are from tropical regions, and they require moist, humid conditions. Other snakes are from more arid regions, and they will require low to medium humidity levels. You will need to do some research to determine what humidity levels your snake requires, and purchase the appropriate equipment. If your snake needs high humidity levels, you may need to purchase [misters](#) or [foggers](#) to keep the habitat moist. Regardless of what levels your snake needs, always monitor humidity with a [hygrometer](#) to make sure levels are not too high or too low.

Here are the humidity levels for some popular pet snakes:

- **Ball Python:**
60%, hide spot that is 70% - 80%
- **Milk Snake:**
40% - 60%
- **Amazon Tree Boa:**
80% - 90%
- **Red-Tailed Boa:**
75%
- **Burmese Python:**
65% - 70%

Substrate

The [substrate](#) you use will also vary by species, depending on a number of factors such as whether or not they will attempt to ingest the substrate, humidity requirements, and more. Some common substrates used for snakes include cypress mulch, paper towels, newspaper, indoor/outdoor carpet, aspen shavings, and butcher paper. You will have to research which substrate will work best for your snake.

Plants, Accessories & Decorations

Again, exactly what you put in the habitat will depend on what species of snake you own. Common items that you could put in your snake's enclosure include a water bowl, a hide spot or shelter, branches, rocks, and shelves.

A water bowl is necessary for drinking and soaking. It will also help maintain humidity levels in the habitat for some species. The bowl should be large enough that your snake can fit his entire body in it and heavy enough that the snake cannot tip it over. The temperature of the water will be dependent on the requirements of the species.

A hide spot will give your snake a place to rest as well as a sense of security. It can be a large box, a flower pot, or any other item that provides almost complete darkness.

Shelves, branches, [vines](#), and other similar items will all give your snake a place to climb and rest. If your snake is arboreal, crisscrossing these items to form forks near the top of the habitat will give him someplace to perch.

You should also put rocks or branches in the enclosure for your snake to rub himself on. This will help when he is shedding his skin. They should be slightly rough, but not abrasive.

Housing a snake is a major undertaking, and you should start planning and putting together the habitat long before you bring your snake home. We recommend that you always have the terrarium set up with the proper accessories, temperature, and humidity level before placing a snake in it.