

HerpVet Information Services

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A Guide to having a pet reptile

What this information page is

This page aims to show you the kind of things you need to consider before obtaining a reptile as a pet, and to give the first-time reptile buyer some idea of what they are letting themselves in for. It should allow you to make an informed choice as to whether in fact a reptile is a suitable pet for you at all, and if so what type and species of reptile would best suit your particular circumstances.

What this information page is not

This information page is NOT designed to give you specific information on keeping any particular species, and having read it in no way qualifies you to keep any reptile adequately. You must learn as much as possible about the reptile you will be keeping from other books, plus speaking to as many experienced keepers as possible, before buying the reptile, as well as always continuing to seek out more/newer information once you are looking after it.

Layout

The main section of this information page consists of several sections. Each of these represents a stage in the process of deciding on a reptile pet, and consists of a series of questions, along with relevant comments, that you need to consider. Only if you feel you have adequate answers to all the questions in each section should you consider going on to the next section, ultimately leading

to a choice of the particular reptile you will be buying and your introduction to the joys of keeping reptiles!

There are also various appendices for your information. These include a shopping list of things to do, the answers to some common questions (including a mention of the Salmonella risk) and a list of recommended reading.

General Points - should you have a pet reptile?

In this section are some questions which must be addressed before the purchase of a reptile is even considered. If the answer to any of these questions is no, then the whole idea of obtaining a reptile should be dropped.

Questions to ask yourself include:

Why do you want a pet reptile?

By the fact that you are taking the trouble to read this booklet, it is unlikely that this will apply to you, but please bear in mind that “for showing off to my friends” is not a suitable reason for having a pet reptile. You **MUST** approach it with a suitably responsible attitude - we are dealing with the life of an innocent animal here.

Does at least one (reasonably adult) member of the family want a reptile?

No animal should be neglected, which is likely to occur if this is not the case. Young children must be supported by at least one adult responsible for the animal’s welfare.

Do any of the family have strong objections to having a reptile in the house?

It’s obviously not a good situation if the presence of the reptile causes tension in the human occupants of the house, with possible effects on the animal.

Are the potential circumstance for keeping the reptile reasonably stable?

It must be borne in mind that many reptiles are relatively long-lived, so if significant changes in the circumstances are likely (such as the owner going off to college, for example) then careful consideration is necessary before a reptile is purchased.

Am I willing to invest the necessary time and effort in keeping a reptile?

Although they don't need as much daily effort as some pets, reptiles do need attention in terms of feeding, cleaning out and simply observing or checking for potential problems on at least a daily basis.

Am I willing and able to invest the necessary money in buying and keeping a reptile?

It is obviously very irresponsible to have any pet without being willing or able to provide it with the basic requirements for a reasonable life - suitable (and suitably maintained) housing, adequate food and water, and health care as necessary. While most of the major expenditure will come at the start in terms of setting up the housing of the animal, bear in mind that there will also be ongoing costs, particularly if the animal needs veterinary attention. YOU are responsible for your pet, and you MUST be willing and able to pay for what it needs. Health care insurance is well worth considering.

Can you provide suitable conditions and management for a pet reptile?

Providing the correct conditions for a reptile is not as simple as for many small mammals, for example, although the general principles are similar. Reptile housing will need the items below - if you are unwilling or unable to provide all the items discussed, you should not purchase the reptile. It must be stressed once again that these are based on a "general" reptile, and certain additions may be necessary for particular species.

The questions you must ask yourself include the following. Below each is a brief mention of the sort of factors which need to be taken into account when considering the item. Specific recommendations have not generally been made, as you should get them from reading, and from conversations with experienced keepers.

Will I have a suitable cage (vivarium/etc) for the reptile?

Specifics will vary, but the basic requirements are suitable size, construction, material and absence of sharp projections. Obviously it must also be suitable for fixing the heating/lighting arrangement you are going to use. Consider ease of cleaning, strength, access (particularly for larger reptiles), durability and insulation.

Will I have a suitable location for the reptile's cage?

Again very dependant on your situation, but basic requirements include sufficient space, not near fumes (basically a kitchen or anywhere heavy smoking occurs can be ruled out) and not subject to getting too hot (e.g. from direct sunlight in summer). Draughts are also best avoided, although some air movement is necessary. Also consider access of other pets, and bear in mind that you can't use most flea treatments around reptiles. Also be aware you will need to avoid most air fresheners, aerosols etc in the vicinity of the enclosure.

Will I be able to furnish the reptile's cage suitably?

Again specifics vary, but generally requirements are substrate, water container or supply system (some reptiles need droplets from spraying and won't use a water bowl at all), hide boxes and, for climbing species, something to climb on.

Will I be able to provide suitable, safe sources of heating and lighting?

Suitability of various sources of heating and lighting is discussed in detail in many other books. Safety basically requires that you need to ensure that they are electrically safe and that the animals cannot come into direct contact with too hot a surface (which includes virtually all heat supplies).

Will I be able to provide the correct temperature range for the reptile?

Basically a function of the heating and lighting used. You must provide a temperature gradient, so the animal(s) have some choice, and it must be suitable for the species you are obtaining.

Will I be willing and able to maintain a reasonable level of hygiene in the reptile's cage?

You need to be certain that whoever is responsible for the reptile will have enough time (and willpower!) to keep the cage clean.

Will I be able to provide adequate food for the reptile?

Consider what the animal eats, and whether you are happy to have that food in the house - crickets, for example, will escape no matter how careful you are. Similarly, there's no point buying a snake that you are unhappy feeding (dead) rodents to.

Will I be able to provide veterinary health care for the animal if necessary?

Like other animals, reptiles may get ill occasionally, and in any case it is always worthwhile getting health checks and discussions of progress with an experienced vet at suitable intervals. Remember that such care can be expensive - but by taking on a reptile, you are taking on full responsibility for that animal's life, and you must be willing to pay for health or other professional care as necessary. Veterinary health insurance can help with this.

Will I be able to provide for the animal in the longer term?

Remember that many reptiles live a long time if cared for correctly - many chelonia, in particular, will often outlive people.

If the answer to all these questions is yes, then you are now ready to consider what sort of reptile to buy.

What sort of reptile for you?

You may well have your own ideas on this, or even a particular animal in mind. It should be stressed that the guidelines below are to a certain extent a personal view of what species are generally suitable for beginners, although bear in mind that they are backed by extensive experience of the sort of problems beginners have from a veterinary viewpoint. I will also mention a few popular species and explain why I feel that they are not suitable for beginners.

One factor which has been considered important in compiling the lists below is that of "backup" - how much easily accessible published information is available and how easy it is to find experienced keepers of the species to compare experiences and ask questions. To a certain extent this will also mean that you are more likely to be able to get captive-bred specimens of those species.

The comments here are intended as general guides, and absence of a species from the list does not necessarily mean that it is unsuitable. However, where a species is specifically discouraged it does mean that - I consider it to be unsuitable as a first reptile.

General comments

The first point which must be made concerns the original source of the reptile, where there are four categories as below. Unfortunately, there is some looseness, and even downright lying in

some places, over the use of these terms.

Captive-Bred (CB): These are animals bred in captivity by (generally) small scale breeders. By far the best animals for captivity for a variety of reasons, both conservation-wise and from a practical point of view (less chance of parasitic or adaptation to captivity problems).

Captive farmed (CF): Animals bred in captivity but on large units, often in their country of origin (“captivity” sometimes meaning just a fenced off area of wild land). In many ways these can be the worst category, as they are often kept in such high stocking concentrations that parasitic problems are more likely to be severe than in wild caught individuals. This is however variable, as captive farmed may also be applied to big professional breeders with reasonable healthcare and conditions. They may or may not be better than wild caught from a conservation point of view.

Long term captive (LTC): This term is used to refer to individual animals which were taken from the wild originally, but have been in captivity for some time and, at least by general implication, have had any adaptation/parasitic problems sorted out. Usually reasonable pets if they are truly adapted to captivity.

Wild caught (WC): Means just what it says. This animal has been caught in the wild. Apart from significant conservation and welfare issues, WC specimens are generally to be avoided - they are likely to have parasitic problems and to be difficult to adapt to captivity.

To stress it again, for a beginner (and in most circumstances any reptile keeper) captive bred animal are strongly recommended.

Age is another point. As a beginner, an adult animal is generally easiest and is therefore recommended. Young animals are generally more delicate and may be difficult to start off feeding. If you do want a youngster, therefore, make sure that it is not too young, and an established feeder.

The reptiles usually kept as pets may be broadly categorised as follows:

Snakes small rodent eaters

fish eaters

[insect eaters - not recommended]

[larger snakes - not recommended for beginners]

Lizards small (wholly or primarily insectivorous) lizards.

larger (carnivorous/omnivorous) lizards

[larger herbivorous lizards - not recommended]

Chelonia Terrestrial (land dwelling) tortoises herbivorous

omnivorous

Aquatic terrapins

I will now consider each category in more detail. One thing I should discuss here, which will be mentioned again below (a lot!) is the question of diet. Nutritional-related problems are a factor in most of the reptile cases that need veterinary attention, and this can be one of the hardest things to get right in the husbandry/management.

Unfortunately, there are few complete diets available for pet reptiles, and the efficacy of these is suspect or at least unproven in most cases. The situation is improving, and there are one or two companies whose products are generally thought to be reasonable (e.g. Pretty Bird, Mazuri foods), but there is still some way to go. For larger carnivores (snakes, some lizards) there is little problem, as the staple diet (of whole rodents) is more or less nutritionally complete.

However, for insectivores (most small/medium lizards) supplementation of the insects is necessary. There are a lot of successful regimes possible, and we do not have all the answers by any means - I have seen supplementation regimes that should be fine produce deficient animals, and theoretically deficient regimes result in very healthy animals. The same applies to herbivores, where it is possible to give a reasonably balanced diet, but this requires a lot of thought and preparation with a variety of fruits, vegetables and leafy plants.

Snakes

The big general advantage of snakes as pets is ease of feeding, as there is a ready-made complete food available (whole rodents) which means that dietary problems are very rare. This is in contrast to herbivorous or insectivorous reptiles, where nutritional and related problems are a significant factor in the majority of cases needing veterinary attention.

Snakes are also relatively easy to handle as a general rule, but this does vary!

Small snakes (used here to refer to species under 6 ft/2 m maximum adult length)

A wide variety of snakes are available and popular in this category. Generally, rodent eaters are preferable for beginners, as fish or insects are potentially problematic diets. There are now some reportedly nutritionally-complete “steaks” available for fish-eating species, which would obviously improve the situation if they are in fact complete. Fish or insect eating snakes also tend to be delicate and flighty - many fish-eating snakes are only too ready to spray scent gland contents over you! By the way, this division on diet is based on natural prey - you may be able to convert fish eating species to take rodents, but this can be difficult and is hassle you don't need as a beginner.

A wide variety of small snakes are suitable for beginners; among the best, from a point of view of backup, would be;

Corn snake and other north American ratsnakes

Kingsnakes/milksnakes

(if you particularly want a fish-eating species, the common ones are all generally similar in requirements and behaviour. Garter snakes, preferably one of the larger species for a beginner, have the most backup.)

[I would recommend against one of the few insectivorous snake species for a beginner, in view of the potential diet problems and their general delicacy]

Large snakes

These are to be strongly discouraged for beginners - they are really unsuitable for all but the

most dedicated (and reasonably rich) owners, due to their space, feeding and handling requirements. Do note that some commonly available species, sold as youngsters, fall into this category - if a seller tries to persuade you, as a beginner, to get a boa constrictor or burmese python, I would strongly recommend going elsewhere!

Lizards

Lizards, particularly the smaller species, tend to be the most active reptiles. Their general drawbacks include a nasty bite, even for some relatively small species (which they are frequently not at all reluctant to use) and potential dietary problems. They are also generally more demanding in their environmental requirements than snakes, although once the correct set-up is achieved there should be few problems.

Small lizards (see below for size comments)

Size guides are a bit more vague here, as tail length can be a significant portion of the total. In this category I am including lizards with a snout-vent length (SVL; i.e. body but not tail) of less than about 30 cm (12"). These species are generally quite active, largely or exclusively invertebrate/meat eating, and usually diurnal.

There is a wide variety available, and subject to the general provisos many may be suitable for beginners. Small species in particular may be delicate (both in terms of environmental requirements and handling), so species towards the larger end of the scale are usually better for a beginner. Most suitable in terms of backup would be:

Bearded dragon

Leopard gecko

Blue-tongued skink

Larger, (primarily) carnivorous lizards

Many of these get too big to be suitable for a beginner, although the bosc's/savannah monitor can make a reasonable pet if you have sufficient space. They do have the advantage of an easy diet, although you need to watch for obesity.

Larger, (primarily) herbivorous lizards

With the general comments regarding diet in mind, these may be suitable as pets. However, they usually require a lot of space, and iguanas particularly are not really suitable for beginners due to their relatively demanding environmental requirements and potential handling risks - even apparently tame individuals can be seriously (and I mean visit-to-the-hospital seriously!) nasty under some circumstances.

Chelonia (Tortoises, terrapins and turtles)

As pets, the main point about chelonia is their space requirements. If you don't have a suitable (and secure) garden, or access to one, herbivorous terrestrial chelonia are unlikely to be suitable pets for you. They are generally grazing animals which naturally wander some distance, as opposed to most snakes and lizards, and few will be happy in a cramped indoor enclosure. Their best food is also usually garden plants, which again necessitates access to a garden where no agricultural chemicals are used. They **will** need a suitable heated and lit set-up indoors, for poor weather and/or illness, but for most practical situations they will also need access to a garden. Smaller omnivorous terrestrial chelonia can be kept successfully in an indoor enclosure, but again it will generally need to be larger than snake or lizard enclosures (a 10 cm box tortoise probably requires more floor space than a 2 m python).

Aquatic species, again, can be kept indoors in an aquatic set-up, but will often grow fairly large - red-eared terrapins, for example, need at least a medium-pond-sized enclosure when adult. They can also be significantly dangerous to a handler in many cases.

It is worth noting that, as a rule, chelonia keepers often tend to be somewhat separate from snake and lizard keepers, with several chelonia-only societies in the U.K, and with many "herpetological" societies consisting mainly of snake/lizard keepers.

In terms of species of terrestrial herbivorous chelonia, only mediterranean tortoises

(spur-thighed and herman's) are advisable for beginners, and even then with reservations. More tropical species are far more demanding in their heating requirements and in the British climate will not get much time in the summer when they will be comfortable outside. There are plenty of captive-bred mediterranean tortoises around, and reasonable back-up, so if you really want a tortoise they are the ones to go for. Bear in mind that these should, by law, be implanted with (or if too small for implantation, supplied with) a microchip as well as appropriate paperwork.

Smaller omnivorous terrestrial chelonia generally means box tortoises of various sorts. With the usual reptile proviso of the necessity for getting conditions right, these can be reasonable pets. However, bear in mind that they will almost certainly be wild caught animals, not something to be encouraged.

For aquatic freshwater terrapins (marine turtles are not suitable for beginners!), the main problems are usually potential size and also keeping an aquarium set-up clean. For this reason I would generally discourage them as pets, although the smaller American turtles (e.g. map turtle) may be reasonable as pets.

Before buying your reptile - a “To Do” checklist

There are several things you must do BEFORE you buy your actual reptile. These include:

Read up and learn as much as possible.

This is absolutely essential - you can never know too much about your pets. One word of caution, however - you may read or hear conflicting advice from various sources. This does not necessarily mean that one is right and one is wrong - different things seem to work best for different people under different circumstances. If talking to people, try to get reasons for their recommendations if they disagree with something you've read or heard, and see if their reasons make sense.

Select the type and species of reptile you wish to buy.

An essential step in view of the next point!

Purchase and set up the proposed vivarium.

This must be done so that you can ensure that your set-up is producing appropriate temperature gradients, humidity etc - while minor adjustments may be made in use, you need to be sure that the set-up is broadly suitable before any animal goes into it.

It is strongly recommended that you join a local herpetological society/reptile club.

Talking to people who have actually kept reptiles (both generally, and more specifically the species you are interested in) is always very useful - usually more so than many books. There are reptile clubs all over the place, so you should be able to find one near you. Various contacts are listed on my links page, but they are always changing and your best bet is to ask a local herpetologist or your pet shop.

Find a suitably located veterinary surgeon

It is worth finding a veterinary surgeon you are happy with now, as it is strongly recommended that you take any new acquisition to the vet for a full check-up.

Commonly asked questions (and their answers!)

Below are some common questions, and their answers.

What is herpetology/herpetoculture?

Herpetology is the study of reptiles and amphibians. It tends to be used for the scientific approach to reptiles and amphibians nowadays, and herpetoculture has come into use to describe the keeping and breeding of herptiles (as you may see or hear used for reptiles and amphibians) for pleasure/casual interest.

What sort of costs am I looking at?

Obviously this is very difficult to answer as it will vary so much, but as a general guide housing a reptile properly will cost in the region of £100 upwards for the initial set-up. Running costs depend on the set-up and foods for the animal, but are likely to be a few pounds a week. Other costs may include replacing broken/worn out accessories such as light bulbs, and veterinary fees - if you cover these with insurance it will obviously help if there is a problem, but if not remember

that veterinary bills for more demanding procedures and treatments could run into hundreds of pounds.

Where should I obtain a pet reptile from?

Again, this depends on circumstances. The general rule must be that you satisfy yourself as to the (a) honesty, and (b) reptile-keeping abilities of whoever (petshop or individual) that you obtain the reptile from. (a) is up to you - you obviously have more come-back generally against shops rather than individuals, and it is probably unwise to buy a reptile from anyone not personally known or recommended to you. (b) may be judged by looking at the way the person/shop's own animals are kept - are they kept clean, do they appear healthy etc. As a beginner particularly, it is also important that whoever you obtain the animal from is helpful, both before and after purchase, with regards to advice. It is also an excellent idea to take your purchase to a veterinary surgeon as soon as possible, to get it checked out for problems and to discuss its care.

What about Salmonella/other health risks?

You will probably have heard (lots!) recently about health scares with pet reptiles. As far as disease-causing organisms go, the basic facts are that most if not all reptiles carry potentially dangerous Salmonella and/or other bacteria, but that proper hygiene will make the risk of problems very small. Certainly reptiles confined within an enclosure pose very little risk provided basic hygiene (washing hands, preferably in anti-bacterial soap, after handling or cleaning out, and cleaning any cage furnishings away from sinks used by humans) is followed. Reptiles that are allowed to roam free in a room, however, could potentially contaminate anything that they contact in that room, and this practice does pose risks. The risks are fairly minimal for healthy adults, but if anybody with a reduced immune system, such as young children or AIDS patients, might be exposed this practice should not be allowed. (Further information can be obtained from an information sheet available from HerpVet Information Services).

As far as physical risks go, the animals recommended in this information page pose little or no risk of significant injury to a handler. Aggressive individuals may cause minor bite wounds or bruising but little more (although any animal-caused injury that breaks skin may be or become infected, and should be cleaned thoroughly and carefully monitored with a doctor being consulted if you are at all worried). Other species may be a problem, but as a beginner's text there is no place here to discuss specific handling/management strategies.

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