

## 6 Methods for Creating Beautiful Enclosure Backgrounds

Written by Mariah Healey, ReptiFiles.com



Want to know a quick way to instantly make your reptile's enclosure look more naturalistic and attractive? Add a background! In addition to enhancing aesthetic, an enclosure background can decrease stress, help with humidity management, brighten the enclosure interior, disguise water marks, and/or increase the surface area available to your pet. Here are 6 tried-and-true methods for adding a stunning background to your enclosure, in order from easiest to hardest:

### **The Printed Background**

Printed backgrounds are an easy and relatively inexpensive way to make your reptile's enclosure look like it's in the middle of nature. Available in either adhesive or poster format, they create a sense of spaciousness for any type of enclosure. There's also usually a wide enough variety of images that you can choose one which looks like your pet's native habitat. Plus, they're easy to clean!

Printed backgrounds have a few downsides. For one, they're plastic-based and saturated with inks, so while they're waterproof, they may release a small amount of VOCs when close to heat and/or UVB lamps. Adhesive backgrounds are somewhat delicate and may tear during installation, and non-adhesive backgrounds can be difficult to secure. They also offer no insulation value, which can be a perk or a drawback, depending on what you need.

Adhesive backgrounds are designed to be installed inside the enclosure, while poster-type backgrounds are designed to be wrapped around the outside of the enclosure. Adhesive backgrounds are prone to developing bulgy air bubbles, so you will need a ruler or similar object to smooth them out. Poster-type backgrounds work only with glass, and need to be wrapped very tightly around the outside of the enclosure in order to look best, secured with tape rather than glue.

Some enclosure manufacturers will install a printed background for you, which is extremely convenient!

## **The Prefabricated Background**

Prefabricated backgrounds are professional-looking pre-sculpted enclosure backgrounds which quickly and easily make your enclosure look like a zoo exhibit. These can be used to cover one, two, or all three walls, and are usually designed to create a rock wall or tree trunk look, while their texture increases the usable surface area available to your pet. Prefabricated backgrounds may be made from rigid foam, Styrofoam, or cork panels, which affects their durability and longevity. Rigid foam backgrounds are generally extremely durable and long-lasting, and strong enough to feature ledges that reptiles can climb and rest on.

Styrofoam and cork panel backgrounds are less durable, particularly Styrofoam, which gets damaged easily and tends to get chewed on by CUC and feeder insects. This is why this particular material is considered incompatible with bioactive enclosures. Cork panel is safer to use, but is generally less textured than cork flats, which affects its function as a climbing surface. These backgrounds also may need to be trimmed/cut to size for installation, which can be difficult depending on the material.

Most rigid foam backgrounds are made to fit certain styles and sizes of enclosure, so trimming should not be needed unless you intend to customize the fit. To install, simply place and fill the gap between the background and enclosure wall with spray foam (such as Great Stuff). However, make sure to be conservative with the spray foam, as it does expand and can ruin the fit of your background. Styrofoam and cork panel backgrounds can be glued in place with 100% silicone sealant, such as GE1. Once your adhesive has completely set, you're good to go!

## **The Dirt Background**

The dirt background is the easiest of the DIY backgrounds: just a substrate of your choice glued to the enclosure wall(s). This is a highly inexpensive way to create a more natural look than austere wood, glass, or PVC walls, which also offers some value in terms of retaining heat and humidity. However, dirt backgrounds are a bit plain to look at, and they're difficult to clean without damaging the background.

To create a dirt background, you will need tubes of 100% silicone sealant, a caulking gun (if relevant) and a soil-like substrate of your choice. In theory, this method could also be used with wood chips/mulch for a more interesting texture. Dried moss can also be added to the mix for a bit of variety.

1. Open the substrate bag and allow to completely dry out to a "dusty" texture.
2. Lay your enclosure down so the wall you're working on is the "floor".
3. Smear wet silicone in an even layer over the wall.
4. Pour the substrate over the silicone, firmly pressing it in, then allow to dry for at least 24 hours.
5. Vacuum up the remaining substrate that hasn't adhered to the wall.
6. Repeat with other walls as desired.

## The Cork Bark Background

The cork bark background is a slightly more complex variation of the dirt background, using silicone and spray foam to adhere a collage of cork flats. The result is a multidimensional background reminiscent of a tree trunk, with lots of footholds for climbing species. The natural wood material also helps maintain humidity and offers some insulation value as well. Because of the thickness of cork flats, this method works best with larger enclosures.

Although attractive, note that the cork bark background is difficult to clean, time-consuming to plan and assemble, and can be expensive, depending on the amount of cork needed for the project.

To create your cork bark background, you will need 100% silicone sealant, spray foam, cork flats, and a soil substrate of your choice (completely dried).

1. Before getting out the adhesives, lay your enclosure down with the desired wall as the “floor” and plan out how you’re going to arrange your cork pieces.
2. Use spray foam to stick the cork pieces in place, then apply more spray foam between the pieces to make everything more or less level. Remember that spray foam expands as it dries, so be conservative!
3. Let dry for at least 24 hours.
4. Smear wet silicone over the exposed foam and cover with substrate, pressing in firmly. Let dry for at least 24 more hours.
5. Vacuum up the excess substrate.
6. Repeat with other walls as desired.

## The Textured Background

The textured background is a more complex adaptation of the cork bark background, where you create a collage of multiple different materials to create a more complex and hopefully more functional DIY background for your pet to explore. You can press in stone, artificial ledges, cork hollows, branches, even plant pots to augment this background’s functionality — the sky’s the limit! Plus, the spray foam does a good job of anchoring climbing branches.

Like dirt and cork bark backgrounds, the textured background is also difficult to clean. However, because it doesn’t have to take as much planning as the cork bark background, it can take less time to build, depending on how far you want to take it. It can be as simple as a dirt background with a few embedded pieces of wood, or it can be a true collage of materials.

To create a textured background, you will need 100% silicone sealant, spray foam, a soil substrate of your choice (completely dried), and whatever materials you want to press into the background.

1. Before getting out the adhesives, lay your enclosure down with the desired wall as the “floor” and plan out how you’re going to arrange your pieces.
2. Use spray foam to stick the pieces in place, then apply more spray foam around the pieces to help make sure they stick. Add more foam as desired to shape the rest of the background. Let dry for at least 24 hours.

3. Cut off excess foam and file down to remove the naturally lumpy/pillowly texture (if desired).
4. Coat the exposed foam and wall with wet silicone, then cover with substrate. Let dry for at least 24 hours.
5. Vacuum up the excess substrate.
6. Repeat with other walls as desired.

## The Carved Foam Background

Spray foam is an amazing tool in enclosure design. It's inexpensive, lightweight, strong, buildable, nontoxic when dry, durable, and very versatile. It even has insulation value. And if you're willing to put your painting and sculpting skills to the test, it can make for a highly attractive, naturalistic, and even functional background. Your imagination is the limit when it comes to carved foam backgrounds, and they can be as simple or as complex as you want. You can even build in ledges and caves! Plus, unlike styrofoam, spray foam is hard enough to resist nibbling by CUC and feeder insects.

The main downside to a carved foam background is its sheer difficulty. Creating realistic-looking textures from foam and paint takes a certain amount of practice and skill, and it's quite likely that your first attempt or few won't quite live up to your expectations. As an additional note, carved foam backgrounds are made entirely of artificial material, which can be another downside if that's important to you.

To create a carved foam background, you will need several cans of spray foam (ex: Great Stuff), grout or foam coat, acrylic exterior-grade paint, and a nontoxic sealant.

1. Plan how you want your finished background to look. Having a reference photo is very helpful!
2. Lay your enclosure down with the desired wall as the "floor".
3. Apply as much foam as you need to create a thick enough layer to build what you want. For particularly thick foam application, you may need to apply it in layers to allow the foam to cure completely and with a strong structure.
4. Allow to dry for at least 24 hours until hardened all the way through.
5. Repeat with other walls as desired.
6. Sketch the shape of your background over the foam.
7. Start carving. Tools that you can use for this process include razor knives, serrated steak knives, wire cutters, Dremels, low-grit sandpaper, etc.
8. Once you're finished, cover the foam with grout or foam coat of your desired color. Let dry.
9. Apply paint to create natural highlights and shadow for extra dimension, if desired. Let dry.
10. Apply sealant and let cure completely.

## Conclusion

Adding a background to your reptile's enclosure is one of the biggest ways to make the enclosure more attractive, and in many cases, more functional as well. Fortunately, there are many methods of accomplishing this, so you can have a gorgeous enclosure no matter what your skill level or budget.

Just make sure to keep a box of disposable gloves on hand if you DIY — otherwise that beautiful background will end up all over your hands as well!

*Image by [ShekuSheriff](#) from [Pixabay](#)*