

Boa Constrictor Care guide and bioactive terrarium maintenance

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Boa constrictor (*Boa sp.*)

Difficulty: Intermediate - Hard

Boa constrictors are a group of semi-arboreal snakes found all over Central and South America. In the wild their preferred habitat is tropical and subtropical broadleaf forests, where they spend time both on the forest floor and in the trees.

These snakes are crepuscular, which means that although they are active at night, they are most active around dawn and dusk. Like other snakes, boa constrictors are carnivorous, and they use this time to hunt a variety of birds and mammals.

Pattern, coloring, and size vary depending on the boa's exact species/subspecies and locale of origin. There are 10 known Boa species and subspecies, although *B. constrictor constrictor* and *B. imperator* are the most commonly kept as pets.

- *Boa constrictor amarali*
- *Boa constrictor constrictor*
- *Boa constrictor occidentalis*
- *Boa constrictor longicauda*
- *Boa constrictor nebulosa*
- *Boa constrictor orophias*
- *Boa constrictor ortonii*
- *Boa constrictor sabogae*
- *Boa imperator*
- *Boa sigma*

(For descriptions and photos of each subspecies, visit [ReptiFiles](#).)

Although size varies, these snakes generally range between 5-10' long, with males being smaller than females. Larger individuals have been recorded, but it is assumed that giants are typically the result of excess feeding.

Boa constrictors are some of the most popular pet snakes in the US due to their curious natures and tolerance toward humans, although larger individuals present special husbandry and handling challenges. Expect your pet to live 30+ years with good care.

What You Need for a Bioactive Boa Constrictor Enclosure:

- 4'L x 2'W x 4'H front-opening enclosure
- [Exo Terra Reptile Deep Dome Fixture Large](#), x2
- [Arcadia Halogen Heat Lamp, 50w](#), x2
- Plug-in lamp dimmer, x2
- [Arcadia Forest D3 6% UVB T5 Bulb 22"](#)
- [The Bio Dude Solar Grow T5 HO Single Bulb Light Strip 24"](#) (for UVB)
- [The Bio Dude Solar Grow 36"](#) light and fixture
- [Terra Firma Bioactive Kit 4' x 2' x 2' PVC Kage](#)
- [Ball Python Clean Up Crew Pack](#)
- [Terra Firma Premium Plant Kit, 40 breeder](#), x2
- Pressure sprayer
- [Exo Terra Corner Water Dish, X-Large](#)
- Thick climbing branches
- Cork logs
- 2+ hides/caves
- [Bio Dude Digital Thermometer / Hygrometer](#), x2
- [Miner-All Outdoor calcium supplement](#)
- [Exo Terra Reptile Multivitamin](#)
- [Zoo Med Stainless Steel 10" Curved Feeding Tongs](#)

Terrarium Size

When it comes to choosing a terrarium for pet reptiles, keep in mind that larger is always better! Boa constrictors are active snakes that appreciate having plenty of room to stretch out, climb, and explore, and they quickly get bored in small or sparse enclosures. **The minimum enclosure size recommended for housing one boa constrictor is at least 4'L x 2'W x 4'H.** This size can house a smaller (equal to or less than 6' long) boa constrictor for its entire life, but you will eventually need to upgrade for a larger snake. The general rule for determining an appropriate 'minimum' semi-arboreal snake enclosure size is:

- Length plus width is equal to or greater than the snake's expected adult length
- Height is equal to or greater than half the snake's expected adult length

Multiple boa constrictors should not be housed in the same enclosure.

Lighting

Boa constrictors are crepuscular (active at night, particularly dawn and dusk), so they benefit from having a light in their enclosure to regulate their day/night cycle.

There is a common myth that crepuscular reptiles are stressed by light. There is another myth that snakes do not "need" UVB light for survival and therefore providing it as part of their habitat in captivity is unnecessary. Both are completely false and do not reflect the snake's natural history. Our goal as good reptile keepers is not to simply allow our pets to survive — it is to do everything in our power to enable them to thrive. And there is mounting scientific evidence that UVB is, in fact, beneficial to boa constrictors and other snakes.

Therefore, **we recommend installing a Zoo Med T5 HO ReptiSun 5.0 or Arcadia Forest 6% in a reflective T5 HO fluorescent fixture**, long enough to cover about 1/2 of the enclosure's length and placed next to the heat lamps. So for a 48" long enclosure, you will want a bulb about 22" long. Do not use other brands — when it comes to UVB, *brand matters!*

If your enclosure has a mesh top, it's best to install the UVB fixture on top of the enclosure. If it does not, it's best to also install a mesh lamp guard such as the Arcadia LampGuardPro over it so the snake can't come in direct contact with the bulb.

Heating

Because boa constrictors are reptiles, they need a range of temperatures within their enclosure so they can regulate their own body temperature as needed. Areas of heat speed up their metabolism and promote activities like digestion and healing. Cool areas slow the metabolism and promote activities like rest and energy conservation.

Your boa's basking area should be between around 90°F, and the cool side should be between 75-80°F. Create the basking area by placing a platform or sturdy branch around 11-14" below the lamps.

Many boa constrictor keepers will recommend using heat pads as the snake's primary source of heat, but heat pads don't work well in a bioactive enclosure, and especially not in a tall, semi-arboreal setup. Instead, use a cluster of at least two heat bulbs like the 50w Arcadia Halogen Basking Spot in 5.5-8.5" dome heat lamps. Plug each heat lamp into a lamp dimmer or dimming thermostat so you can control them if they get too hot.

To monitor the temperatures in your boa's enclosure, place on digital probe thermometer in the basking area, and another on the floor of the cool end.

Humidity

Boa constrictors are a tropical species, so they need humid air in their environment in order to stay hydrated, keep their lungs healthy, and shed their skin properly. To be specific, **they need an average of 55-75% ambient humidity**, with access to an area of extra high humidity for shedding. Keep track of your humidity levels with a digital hygrometer like the Bio Dude Digital Thermometer/Hygrometer, with the probe placed in the middle of the enclosure.

A large water bowl will help, but regular misting with distilled water in a pressure sprayer like the Exo Terra Mister is recommended. It also helps to provide a "humid hide" lined with damp sphagnum moss, which should be the most humid spot in the enclosure. Since you have a bioactive enclosure you may not have to worry about the moss getting moldy, but make sure to check on it regularly and replace as needed.

One of the nice things about bioactive setups is that the live plants help maintain healthy humidity levels! Make sure to water your plants at appropriate intervals to keep them healthy.

Substrate

To create a bioactive boa constrictor enclosure, you will need a bioactive-compatible substrate. That means things like coconut husk or cypress mulch aren't going to work. You need a soil-like mix that mimics the conditions of your boa's natural habitat. You can make your own with 2 parts organic topsoil, 2 parts Zoo Med Reptisoil (or similar), and 1 part play sand, or you can let The Bio Dude do the work for you with a 4' x 2' x 2' PVC Kage Terra Firma Bioactive Kit.

Because you're setting up a bioactive habitat, you will need to mix and layer the substrate with sphagnum moss and plenty of leaf litter. For best results, combine with an appropriate amount of Bio Dude Bio Shot.

Finally, in order to make the substrate functional, make sure to add tropical CUC organisms like dairy cow isopods, powder blue/orange isopods, dwarf isopods, and tropical springtails. You can also add other species like dubia roaches, earthworms, and millipedes!

Decorating the Enclosure

Enclosure décor is more than just making your setup look nice. It's also an important part of providing *environmental enrichment* to your boa constrictor, which enhances your pet's quality of life by providing opportunities to express natural behaviors, explore, and exercise.

Here are some ideas for ways that you can decorate and enrich your boa constrictor's bioactive enclosure:

- ledges
- hollow logs
- thick, sturdy branches
- hides/caves
- plants
- décor

Feeding Your Boa Constrictor

Boa constrictors are obligate carnivores, which means that they *must* eat whole animals in order to get the nutrition they need. There is no replacement. Here is a rough sketch of how much and how often you should be feeding your boa, based on snake age.

- Newborn-6 months: every 10-12 days
- 6-12 months: every 10-12 days
- 12-18 months: every 12-14 days
- 18-24 months: every 2-3 weeks
- 2-2.5 years: every 2-3 weeks
- 5-3 years: every 3-4 weeks
- 3-4 years: every 4-6 weeks
- 4+ years: every 4-8 weeks

Always feed your snake inside its enclosure, not outside. Contrary to the myth, feeding inside does not make snakes more aggressive. However, use feeding tweezers to offer the rat, not your hand, in order to prevent accidental strikes.

Variety is essential to complete nutrition. Aside from the usual mice and rats, you can add variety to your boa's diet with African soft-furred rats, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, young rabbits, chicks, quail, and Reptilinks. Do not offer live prey if it can be avoided, as live rodents may injure your snake in the process of feeding. Instead, buy frozen prey and thaw to 100°F internal temperature in a plastic bag in warm water.

Handling Tips

After bringing your new pet home, do not handle it until it is eating regularly. This can take anywhere from two weeks to two months, so be patient and use this time to make sure your husbandry is on point. Once your snake is ready for handling, handle it at least 1-2x weekly to keep it accustomed to you, but no more than once daily. Handling is also a good way to encourage your boa to exercise and provide additional enrichment!

Wash Your Hands First

Before you pick up your boa, first wash your hands with soap or hand sanitizer. This removes potentially harmful bacteria, viruses, or parasites from your hands, as well as makes your hands smell distinctly inedible. Boas find prey via heat and smell. If your (warm) hands smell like rat, animal, or anything else remotely appetizing, your pet may confuse you for food.

How to Pick Up a Snake

Next, use a paper towel roll to tap its head (gently). This sets expectations by letting the snake know that it's time for handling, not food. Pick it up with two hands, one behind the head and one supporting the rest of the body. NEVER pick up a snake by its tail — this can really hurt their spine!

Safety with Snakes

Always supervise children closely when they are handling a pet snake (or any kind of pet, frankly). This is as much for the snake's safety as it is for the children. Keep the snake's head away from your face, and don't let it wrap around your neck. Boa constrictors don't try to hurt humans, but they are strong enough to cause accidents. For boas larger than 8', it's good practice to have another adult in the room at all times during handling.

DO NOT Handle If...

Don't handle your snake within 48 hours of a meal, as this can stress them out and lead to regurgitation, which is a traumatic experience that can actually lead to death. Also do not handle if your pet's eyes have turned opaque or cloudy. This means that the snake is preparing to shed and can't see well, making them more jumpy than usual and more likely to bite out of self-defense.

Care information courtesy of ReptiFiles. Visit [ReptiFiles.com](https://reptifiles.com) for further information on boa constrictor care.

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