

## Crickets, Roaches & Worms: Oh My! Why a Varied Diet is Essential for Reptiles

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You may have seen advice on the internet telling you that it's best to give your reptile a varied diet. This may seem strange to you, especially if you've had other pets before. After all, dogs and cats, and fish can all eat the same food every day, and as long as you use a reputable brand, they seem to be fine, so why doesn't this work for reptiles?

After all, using a variety of foods is, frankly, inconvenient. Rather than just keeping a bulk bag of kibble on hand, you have to plan out a rotation and then find ways to source all of these different foods. Plus the foods usually have to be fresh, and reptiles don't usually eat very much, so spoilage is a concern, too.

Discussion of whether this is actually a best practice for dogs/cats/fish aside, offering the same food to your reptile all the time is not a good idea. Here's why.

### Variety Prevents Pickiness

Reptiles that have been eating the same thing from a young age are less likely to accept new foods than those who are familiar with the variety. This is because they have been taught a very limited definition of what "food" is. For example, a bearded dragon that has been eating superworms and collard greens for years will usually refuse nutritious alternatives such as dubias, black soldier fly larvae, arugula, dandelion greens, etc. In cases like these, the reptile often has to be denied their "favorite" foods for sometimes weeks on end until they give in and start to consider the possibility of other food options.

## Variety Provides Sensory Enrichment

What is meant by “sensory enrichment”? Enrichment, as it applies to keeping animals in captivity, is essentially the practice of encouraging an animal to exercise natural behaviors and engage with its environment through the use of appropriate tools. This can be climbing branches, puzzle feeders, toys, and in this case, a varied diet.

Offering your reptile different foods on a regular basis creates novel scents and/or flavors for them to experience. This makes mealtime more engaging (i.e. exciting) for them and can encourage a better feeding response. Changing up the foods that are being offered is a known method of breaking reptiles out of a “feeding strike.” For example, Chinese water dragons are particularly noted for craving variety and may stop eating if they feel like their menu is too predictable. Even ball pythons have been broken out of a fast by offering an African soft-furred rat instead of their usual domestic rat or mouse.

## Variety Creates More Balanced Nutrition

There’s no such thing as “perfect food.” No matter how “good” or “staple” one food is claimed to be, whether that’s a certain type of rodent, feeder insect, or leafy green, it’s not perfectly balanced. Any given food will always be deficient in some nutrient or other, so when a reptile is fed exclusively on a single type of food, nutrient deficiency becomes more likely to develop. Of course, vitamin and mineral supplements can help bridge the gap, but they’re not an ideal solution, since nutrients are more readily absorbed when they’re naturally present in food rather than added to it.

For example, herbivores are particularly dependent on a varied diet, since they have to get all of their nutrition from plants. It’s common wisdom among seasoned tortoise owners to provide as many different plants in the animal’s diet as possible to ensure adequate nutrition. This may be a general rule with tortoises, but it can apply to other types of reptiles as well. Snakes are more resilient to nutritional deficiency since their food of choice is whole prey, which is a relatively comprehensive food source. But different kinds of prey have different nutritional compositions, so rotating between the feeders you use can still provide a safeguard against mild deficiencies.

## Conclusion

Pet reptiles are essentially wild animals, and they have essentially the same needs. They’re not like dogs and cats, which have been bred in captivity for thousands of years. And because of that fact, reptiles have evolved to make the most of the resources available to them in the wild. That means eating whatever happens to be available. Look at just about any published research on wild reptiles and what they’re eating, and chances are that you’re going to see a massive variety of reported food sources (except certain dietary specialists, such as slug/snail-eating snakes).

In other words, evolution favors the reptiles that aren’t picky and eat whatever is available, rather than sticking to their favorites. These reptiles get more food and a wider variety of nutrients, so they’ve evolved to be able to handle a variety of foods, and in many cases, to prefer a varied diet as well. When you make the effort to supply your pet reptile with a varied diet, you improve their quality of life.

So get creative!