

What Are the Best Types of Décor for Arboreal Reptiles?

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A common myth about reptiles is that they don't care about the way their enclosure looks, as long as their basic needs are being met. This is true to a certain extent — reptiles are unlikely to care about the color of the rocks that you use, or whether you use a black plastic box or a resin cave replica for their hiding place. However, décor isn't just about making an enclosure look pretty. It's about making the enclosure more functional for your reptile to use. Today we're not talking about principles of interior design; we're talking about environmental enrichment.

What sounds more functional: an apartment with a bed, toilet, shower, and kitchen appliances, or an apartment with a table and chairs, couch, stocked bookshelves, TV, computer, board games, etc. in addition to the above? The latter, right? That's more or less environmental enrichment: the art of filling an enclosure with objects that encourage an animal to pursue natural behaviors.

Allowing for the pursuit of natural behaviors is one of the [5 Provisions of Animal Welfare in Captivity](#). For that matter, so is promoting good muscle tone through exercise and good mental health through "positive experiences." In other words, while a reptile may be able to survive without these "amenities," they can't thrive without them, either.

Arboreal means "tree-dwelling," so when you have an arboreal reptile, you need to make sure that it's enclosure is not only tall, but offers plenty of climbing opportunities that allow them to spend most (if

not all) of their time up off of the ground. Arboreal species are generally uncomfortable with being on the ground because their instincts tell them that this makes them vulnerable to predators.

So let's talk about some decorations — ahem, I mean environmental enrichment items — that encourage terrestrial reptiles to exercise their natural behaviors to the fullest! Most arboreal reptiles are temperate to tropical (you don't really find forests in deserts), so the recommendations in this article are made with higher-humidity environments in mind

Branches

What do they do?

- Provide sturdy climbing surfaces
- Create an elevated basking platform
- May also provide hiding opportunities

The best wood to use for climbing branches is generally going to be **manzanita**, **mopani wood**, **bamboo**, and **cork**. Cork hollows are particularly valuable because they double as hiding places in addition to providing climbing material. Certain species, such as green keel-bellied lizards and leachianus geckos, are known to be particularly fond of cork hollows.

Although most arboreal species are quite proficient in the climbing department, it's generally best practice to provide branches at least the same width as the reptile's body. One exception here is chameleons, which should have branches that can be easily grasped by their unique feet. Thinner branches, such as **willow twigs**, can be useful climbing material for particularly young or small reptiles.

Generally speaking, branches should be placed at a variety of angles to vary the reptile's available "landscape". However, keep your particular species' needs in mind as well. For example, many leaf-tailed geckos tend to favor vertical surfaces, but green tree pythons prefer horizontal branches.

Vines

What do they do?

- Provide flexible climbing surfaces

Vines function very similarly to branches, but they offer a different aesthetic and have to be installed differently.

Realistic-looking vines are generally available for purchase at pet stores, but they're also quite easy to make yourself:

1. Choose a well-ventilated area with a table for your workspace
2. Lay down some newspaper or cheap plastic tablecloth to protect the table (this is a messy process)
3. Get some rope of your desired width (I prefer using different widths)
4. Cut the rope into the lengths that you will need to drape the vines from one point to another inside the enclosure
5. Put on disposable gloves
6. Coat each piece of rope generously with black silicone

7. Immediately “bread” the silicone-coated ropes with *bone-dry* loose coconut fiber, pressing the fiber into the wet silicone with your hands
8. Let cure for at least 48 hours
9. Vacuum off the excess coconut fiber
10. Use screws and a drill to attach both sides of each vine to the walls of the enclosure

For a more natural and varied appearance, try twisting together vines of different widths!

Ledges

What do they do?

- Provide additional basking surfaces
- Provide elevated rest areas
- Provide a vantage point for the reptile to survey its “territory”

If you have a textured background that wraps around three sides of the enclosure, or you have a species with sticky toes that can climb smooth surfaces, then your walls are certainly not going to waste. However, if neither of the above applies, then ledges are a great way to make use of what would otherwise become wasted space!

You can build your own reptile ledge(s), or you can buy them from companies like Magnaturals and Universal Rocks.

Textured Backgrounds

What do they do?

- Provide a climbing surface for species that don’t have sticky toe pads
- Cover sides of the enclosure to increase sense of security and decrease stress

Many people like to create textured backgrounds by adhering and sculpting foam into a desired shape, then painting and grouting it for a more naturalistic texture and appearance. However, I’m not much of a sculptor, so I prefer to make my own by adhering flat pieces of natural bark to the walls in a mosaic:

- Select several large pieces of chemical-free natural tree bark
- Lay down the side of the enclosure that you want to work on upon a flat surface in a well-ventilated area
- Map out how you will arrange your bark pieces, and trim to fit as necessary
- Put on disposable gloves
- Lay down a thin, even layer of Great Stuff expanding foam to more or less cover the portion of wall that will be exposed above the substrate
- Place your bark pieces on top
- Let dry for at least 24 hours
- Add more expanding foam to fill the gaps and better secure the bark
- Let dry for at least 24 hours
- Trim the excess foam as needed
- Use glove-clad fingers to coat the exposed wall and foam with black 100% silicone
- Press very dry loose coconut fiber into the silicone and let dry

- Vacuum up the excess coconut fiber

You can also press pieces of sphagnum moss, reindeer moss, and/or Spanish moss into the silicone to add extra naturalism to your background!

If you don't have the interest/time to make your own background, there are certainly commercial options available. Flattened cork bark tiles (Zoo Med) are good on a tight budget, but if you can afford it, Universal Rocks backgrounds are really spectacular.

Avoid the soft foam backgrounds that usually come included with front-opening glass terrariums. These can be chewed on by insects and tend to scuffed up and worn out rather quickly.

Elevated Hides

What do they do?

- Provide secure hiding places off the ground

Elevated hides can be attached to the ceiling or walls of the enclosure — or both! You can make your own by using nuts and bolts to attach a hide to the enclosure, but if you're hanging it from screen, make sure that your screen is strong enough to support your reptile's weight. The hide must also be designed to be easily removable for cleaning. One way to do this for smaller species is to attach a Tupperware (or similar) lid to the top/side, then insert the corresponding container, modified to have an opening big enough for the animal.

Alternatively, you can buy magnetic hides that adhere to the side (and presumably top) of the enclosure via extremely strong magnets. Note that you may need stronger magnets if you are using a PVC or wood enclosure, however, as these hides are generally made with glass terrariums in mind.

When placing a hide on the ceiling of the enclosure, make sure it's not directly underneath any lamps!

Plants

What do they do?

- Provide cover
- Live plants can increase ambient humidity
- Live plants can help prevent overheating
- Live plants improve air circulation

As you can see from the above list, live plants are generally more functional than artificial plants. The Bio Dude actually wrote [a whole article on the subject](#). You can use artificial plants if you're in a pinch, but generally speaking, it's best to go natural.

When choosing plants for your reptile's setup (whether bioactive or simply naturalistic), make sure to look for plants that are compatible with the amount of light, heat, and moisture that your reptile requires. If you have an herbivorous or insectivorous reptile, make sure that the plants are non-toxic if ingested. And if your reptile is on the larger, heavier side, you will need plants large and sturdy enough to avoid getting trampled to death.

Finally, keep in mind that live plants have [particular care needs](#) that you will need to familiarize yourself with!

Conclusion

To summarize: Enclosure décor is not (and should not) be solely for the pleasure of the keeper. It should be selected and arranged in a way that directly benefits your reptile by encouraging natural behaviors and fulfilling natural instincts.

Of course, you can absolutely do this in a way that results in an enclosure that is beautiful as well as functional. The goal is to make sure that you're putting your pet's needs first.

One common misconception about keeping arboreal reptiles is that they should always be housed in enclosures that are taller than they are wide. While the enclosure should definitely be tall enough to allow the animal plenty of vertical space to climb, horizontal space is just as important so the animal has the option of moving horizontally (off the ground), which they naturally do in the wild all the time!

Pro tip: Install arboreal species' enclosures higher off the ground, high enough to be eye level with you or higher. This helps them feel more secure by satisfying their instinctive need to be up high!