

# What Are the Best Types of Décor for Terrestrial 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.

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!

## **Substrate**

What does it do?

- Cushions the reptile’s body
- Helps maintain humidity
- Helps insulate
- Provides a medium to satisfy burrowing instincts

Now, when I talk about substrate, I mean bedding: a loose, natural material placed on the floor of an enclosure. There are many types of substrate available. Choose one that is compatible with your reptile’s needs and doesn’t pose a health risk. Some of the most unsafe substrates include walnut shell and calcium sand. Personally I’m not terribly fond of bark chips/mulch because they can’t be easily passed in the event that they are ingested, although this seems rare, as mulch in particular has been used for years with very few reported complications.

My favorite type of substrate is one that replicates the conditions of a reptile’s natural habitat, which is usually some combination of sand, soil, and occasionally other materials like leaf litter. This can be in a bioactive context or simply used as part of a naturalistic setup.

## **Burrows**

What do they do?

- Provide an underground chamber for your reptile to hide out of sight
- Provide an area of increased humidity for staying hydrated
- Decrease stress by increasing sense of security

Many terrestrial reptiles utilize burrows for a variety of reasons, including hiding from predators and preventing desiccation.

There are a few methods of creating an underground hideout for your terrestrial reptile. One way is that you can use a clay-based substrate to shape the substrate into a burrow. Alternatively, you can bury a hide box or pipe, with an entrance at the surface of the substrate.

Keep in mind that burrows are difficult to keep clean without disrupting the entire setup.

## **Caves**

What does it do?

- Provides an above-ground place for the reptile to hide out of sight
- Decreases stress by increasing sense of security

Commercial reptile caves often act as above-ground “burrows” for pet reptiles. This can be just about any hollow object, including a cork log, half log, opaque plastic box, resin cave replica, or ornamental skull. The important thing is that it provides a dark or shadowed place for the reptile to hide out of sight.

Whatever you choose to use, make sure to provide multiple hiding places. Reptiles like options, and when a reptile (especially a skittish one) knows that it has a bolt-hole nearby, it’s more likely to be comfortable with being out in the open. It may seem counterintuitive to you, but that’s how it works!

## **Plants**

What do they do?

- Provide cover
- Live plants increase humidity
- Live plants help prevent overheating
- Live plants improve air circulation
- Live plants can provide a snack for herbivorous species

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!

## **Large, Flat Stones**

What do they do?

- Absorb heat, providing warmth from below while your reptile also gets it from above

- Radiate warmth for a short period of time after lights out, simulating the warmth radiated by rocks in nature
- Help keep nails filed

Flat stones large enough to accommodate at least most of a reptile's body are my favorite thing to use in reptile enclosures. Their thermal properties make them particularly useful for building a Retes Stack!

Flat stones are often sold by landscape supply stores in the form of concrete pavers, flagstone, and unpolished slate or sandstone tile. You can also get aquarium slate from aquarium supply stores, although in my experience these pieces tend to be on the smaller side (and more expensive). I have seen some people get larger pieces of slate by putting slate cheeseboards to an alternative purpose.

### **Sturdy Branches**

What do they do?

- Encourage exercise by providing something to climb on
- Increase the amount of usable surface area inside an enclosure
- Provide additional basking surfaces
- Provide a vantage point for the reptile to survey its "territory"

Options for branches include sandblasted grapewood, cork bark, cholla, manzanita, and mopani wood. But why am I recommending branches in a terrestrial reptile setup? After all, terrestrial reptiles can't climb, right? Isn't that dangerous?

WRONG.

Although they may not be able to scale glass and prefer not to spend their time in the forest canopy, many terrestrial reptiles are perfectly capable of climbing short distances. And by "short distances," I mean the 24-48" of height that we usually give them with their enclosures. Nature is HUGE — a few feet really isn't that much, and your reptile is likely capable of much more.

Of course, different terrestrial reptiles have different climbing abilities based on their anatomy:

Tortoises, blood pythons, blue tongue skinks, and other heavy-bodied reptiles are likely to have difficulty with climbing, and it may even be dangerous to them if they attempt to climb too high. While I have met some unusually athletic blue tongue skinks (my Merauke is a good example), generally speaking it's best to provide climbing materials with plenty of grip and a gentle slope. Branches are not the best choice for these species unless they are very wide and easy to get over.

Most terrestrial reptiles are average to good climbers, including plated lizards, tegus, hognose snakes, sand boas, and even certain smaller chelonians like musk turtles. Climbing branches of appropriate size and weight, are good additions to the enclosure for these species.

Ball pythons, leopard geckos, uromastix, ocellated skinks, and other reptiles with strong toes or constrictor-type musculature are likely to be very skilled climbers. My uromastix can easily scale the textured walls of her enclosure, and I've seen my ocellated skinks do full pull-ups! These species should definitely have plenty of climbing material as part of their setup.

Concerned about falls? Allow me to reassure you: reptiles that have access to climbing materials from an early age will develop the muscles necessary to become confident, capable climbers. Make sure to provide branches at least as wide as your reptile, and they will do the rest.

## **Ledges**

What do they do?

- Encourage exercise by providing something to climb on
- Increase the amount of usable surface area inside an enclosure
- Provide additional basking surfaces
- Provide a vantage point for the reptile to survey its "territory"

We've already discussed the appropriateness of using climbing objects in terrestrial reptile enclosures, so let's not rehash. Ledges don't work well for species that are poor climbers, since a certain amount of climbing is required to access them in the first place, but ledges are a good choice for good to excellent climbers.

Ledges allow you to make use of walls that would otherwise become wasted space, which in my opinion is reason enough to make sure your reptile has access to at least one. You can build your own reptile ledge, or you can buy them from companies like Magnaturals and Universal Rocks.

## **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.

*Pro tip: To increase the enrichment value of your reptile's setup, occasionally rearrange the décor! This can be a complete overhaul or just moving an object every week, depending on your individual reptile's susceptibility to stress.*