

# What do I need to know before getting my first reptile?

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## What to Know Before Getting Your First Reptile

Reptiles are likely to be unlikely any other pet you've ever had. They're not warm-blooded, they don't have fur, they can't roam your house, they don't eat kibble, and they don't even like to be petted in most cases. In other words, a reptile's needs are likely to be very foreign from your previous experiences. Although this means you will need to do lots of research before taking the plunge, here are nine considerations to get you started.

## Don't Trust What the Pet Store Tells You

You wouldn't ask a grocery store employee for help with a recipe, or a home improvement store employee for advice on a renovation, so why expect pet store employees to be experts on reptile care?

Most pet stores sell a wide variety of animals: dogs, cats, ferrets, hamsters, canaries, parakeets, lizards, snakes, turtles, frogs, toads, goldfish, bettas, tarantulas, scorpions — you get the idea. It's a lot to keep track of, and often pet store employees are minimally trained (if at all) on the care for each one, relying on outdated materials. What pet store employees are trained how to do, however, is sell product. When you rely on pet store employees' "expertise" you are likely to be talked into wasting your money on products that you don't actually need, and may even be harmful to your new pet.

Instead, do your own research on the products that you will need.

### **Avoid Pet Store Starter Kits**

One product that pet store employees will likely try to convince you to buy is a starter kit. These kits are a great idea in theory, but in application they usually come up lacking. Although they are advertised as starter kits, they're usually incomplete, and may be missing components that are essential to a reptile's health and wellbeing.

That's generally the case with reptile kits from the biggest brands, as they're designed for an alluring price tag rather than reptile welfare. However, kits created by experts like The Bio Dude can actually be very helpful in getting your pet's terrarium off to the right start.

### **Reptiles Aren't Cheap Pets**

Many prospective reptile owners make the mistake of thinking, "It's just a snake/lizard/turtle — how expensive could it be?"

As it turns out, they can be very expensive. At the very least, they're definitely not cheap.

Aside from the cost of the animal itself, there's a lot of equipment that goes into creating an appropriate captive environment that meets your reptile's unique needs: the terrarium, heat lamp, UVB, full-spectrum lighting, digital thermometers and hygrometers, a spray bottle, substrate, hideouts...and that's before you factor in enrichment items!

Are there ways to reduce the cost of setting up a reptile terrarium without reducing your pet's quality of life? Absolutely. But you should still expect to shell out *at least* a few hundred dollars on an appropriate setup.

### **Different Species Have Different Needs**

As you might have gathered at this point, reptiles aren't simple pets. Actually, they're quite complicated. And another thing that makes them complicated is the fact that there are thousands of different species. They're not like dogs/cats/rabbits/horses/etc., where there's lots of different breeds, but they all require more or less the same care.

As exotic animals, different reptile species can have vastly different needs. Some like high temperatures, whereas others like it cool. Some like lots of humidity, while others need dry

conditions. Some like to climb, while others like to stay on the ground. Some eat whole prey, while others need a vegetarian diet. This means you will need to thoroughly research and accommodate the needs of the specific type of reptile you wish to keep.

### **Your First Goal is to Replicate Their Natural Habitat**

A big part of meeting your reptile's needs is replicating its natural habitat. Reptiles have evolved over the course of millions of years to thrive within a very specific environment. Take them out of that environment, and they will fail to thrive, possibly even die. So it's a reptile owner's responsibility to replicate the conditions of their pet's natural habitat as thoroughly as possible. This means studying photos and videos of the reptile's habitat, and paying close attention to parameters such as temperature, humidity, UVB strength, diet, and décor.

The best ways to replicate a reptile's natural habitat are through naturalistic and bioactive setups. A naturalistic setup looks like the target reptile's natural environment, but may use artificial plants instead of live, and the substrate still needs to be completely replaced on a regular basis to maintain good hygiene. A bioactive setup also looks like the target reptile's natural environment, but it requires creating a functional micro-ecosystem, complete with beneficial microbes, healthy soil, live plants, and appropriate moisture.

In replicating your reptile's natural habitat, it's also important to provide your reptile with as much space as possible. Many reptile species that are common in captivity have vast wild territories, and when they are provided with a generous, well-set up enclosure, they will happily use every inch of it.

### **One of the Best Ways to Save Money is By Building Your Own Enclosure**

The enclosure is one of the biggest expenses of setting up for a pet reptile. And the bigger the enclosure, the more it will cost. Building your own enclosure enables you to save money without causing your pet reptile to suffer from less space to exercise and explore.

When building a reptile enclosure, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Use a front-opening design for easier access.
- Avoid melamine, as it's heavy and tends to rot from the inside out.
- If using wood lumber, seal it with several coats of waterproofing agent (preferably VOC-free), and seal the corners with 100% silicone.
- Glass is heavy and brittle, but otherwise durable. Acrylic is lightweight, but scratches easily.
- Don't forget to build in plenty of ventilation. Constructing the enclosure with a mesh top allows for better airflow and heat dissipation for desert enclosures, while just placing vents on the sides helps maintain higher humidity.

### **Thermometer and Hygrometers Are Your Friends**

Each type of reptile needs a specific range of temperatures and humidity within its enclosure, not just the presence or absence of heat/moisture. The best way to make sure your temperatures and humidity levels are appropriate for your specific pet reptile is to keep track of them with thermometers and hygrometers.

Analog gauges are not accurate enough to provide reliable information about your pet's environment. Instead, it's best to use a digital probe thermometer and/or infrared thermometer for monitoring basking and cool zone temperatures, and a digital probe hygrometer for monitoring humidity levels. Probes should be placed in the areas where you want readings.

While we're on the topic, don't underestimate the importance of a good lamp timer. This is more convenient for you as the keeper, and also enables you to create a consistent day/night cycle.

### **Use UVB Properly**

The topic of UVB can become complex, but it's important to know the basics so you are using it properly. When not used properly, UVB lighting can become essentially useless. For an explanation on what UVB is and why reptiles need it, read this article from The Bio Dude's blog: [Introduction to UVB, part 1: What is UVB, and Why is it Important to Reptile Husbandry?](#)

When setting up UVB for your reptile, pay attention to bulb strength, bulb type, brand, fixture type, and potential obstructions:

- **Bulb strength:** Pay attention to percentage of UVB output, not wattage. Different reptiles need exposure to different strengths of UVB to be healthy.
- **Bulb type:** UVB bulbs can be compact coil, T5 HO, T8, or mercury vapor. While each has a specific intended use, generally speaking, T5 HO bulbs are your best bet.
- **Bulb length:** As a general rule, terrestrial enclosures should have a UVB bulb half the length of the enclosure, and arboreal enclosures should have UVB spanning the full length.
- **Brand:** [Zoo Med](#) and [Arcadia](#) have the most reliable and top-performing UVB bulbs in the USA.
- **Fixture:** UVB bulbs should be housed in a reflective fixture, preferably with a mirror polish. Not using a reflective fixture may save some money, but you will end up wasting ~50% of the bulb's output.
- **Obstructions:** Terrarium mesh blocks 30-40% of UVB output.

If you know the appropriate basking UVI (UV Index) for your reptile and can buy or borrow a Solarmeter 6.5, that will go a long way toward helping you choose and install your UVB bulb correctly.

### **They Need to Visit the Vet Regularly**

Just like other pets, pet reptiles should see the vet at least once a year for a general checkup and deworming. Make sure to take your pet to a reptile-specific vet, and they will help keep an

eye on your pet's health, especially since reptiles can be very sneaky about when they're feeling unwell.

And of course, whenever you have a concern about your reptile's health, don't ask the internet for advice — make an appointment with a medical professional.

## **Conclusion**

Reptiles are complex pets with unique needs, but the things that make them unique are what make them so cool! Keeping reptiles gives you an unparalleled opportunity to cultivate a slice of nature in your home. Accept, love, and accommodate your reptile for what it is, and you will find great satisfaction in these incredible pets.

The Dude Abides