

Argentine Tegu (*Salvator merianae* & *Salvator rufescens*)

Difficulty: Hard



Argentine tegus are particularly large diurnal, terrestrial lizards found in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Bolivia. This species can grow up to 5' long, with a large triangular head, forked tongue, robust body, strong limbs, thick tapered tails, and strong clawed feet. Males have prominent jowls around the cheek/throat area. Pattern is black or red with white/cream spots and bands.

Argentine tegus are high-commitment pets that need lots of space and things to keep them busy. Think of them like a dog, but with reptilian housing needs, more specific nutrition, and not as tame. They're not the kind of reptile you can get away with bringing home on a whim!

Average lifespan for an Argentine tegu is 15-20 years, but they have been known to live over 30 with excellent care.

What You Will Need for a Bioactive Argentine Tegu Enclosure:

- 8' x 4' x 4' front-opening reptile enclosure, or larger
- [Arcadia Lamp Holder Pro](#), x4
- [100w Arcadia Halogen Heat Lamp](#), x4
- Plug-in lamp dimmer, x4
- 46" Arcadia Desert D3+ 14% UVB T5 Bulb
- 48" T5 HO fluorescent light fixture
- [The Bio Dude Solar Grow 36" light and fixture](#), x2
- [Zilla 24/7 Digital Timer Power Center](#)
- Temperature gun
- [Starter MistKing Misting System V 4.0](#)
- [Bio Dude Digital Thermometer / Hygrometer](#)
- [Bio Dude Terra Firma Bioactive Kit 4' x 2' x 2' PVC Kage](#), x4

- [Bio Dude Ball Python Clean Up Crew Pack](#), x4
- Hideout/cave
- Large, sturdy live plants
- Large logs/branches
- Large food bowl
- Large water dish
- [Miner-All Outdoor calcium supplement](#)
- [Exo Terra Reptile Multivitamin](#)
- Soft-tipped feeding tweezers

Terrarium Size

Argentine tegus are very large lizards that reach physical maturity by roughly 3 years of age, so they need a lot of space even from the beginning. It may seem like too much at first, but they grow into it quickly. The minimum enclosure size for an Argentine tegu is 8'L x 4'W x 4'H, or at 32 sq ft of floor space. Larger is ideal — this is the type of pet that can easily make use of its own room!

This enclosure should be front-opening and preferably placed at ground level due to the weight of the substrate and so the tegu can easily enter and exit the enclosure when the door is open.

Do not house more than 1 tegu per enclosure. Housing tegus together will likely stress them out, and risks them fighting and getting severely injured.

Lighting

Argentine tegus are di diurnal, which means that they are primarily active during the day. And as reptiles, they need UVB lighting as part of their environment to promote optimal health and wellness. Reptiles use UVB light to create the vitamin D that their body needs, as well as to strengthen their immune system, and stimulate production of endorphins. UVB even helps keep the enclosure free of pathogens!

The Arcadia Desert 14% is a powerful UVB lamp that is the best option for providing the right amount of UVB for a tegu in a tall enclosure. If installed on the inside of the enclosure without mesh obstruction, the basking platform should be placed so the lizard's back will be 20-24" below the lamp at closest.

The UVB bulb and fixture should span 1/2 of the enclosure's length, and should be placed on the same side as the heat lamp, because heat and UVB work together. These bulbs must be replaced once a year to remain effective. For best results, install the bulb in a reflective fixture like the Arcadia ProT5 or The Bio Dude Solar Grow light fixture.

If you are setting up a bioactive enclosure, you will also need a full-spectrum fluorescent or LED grow light for the plants that spans most of the length of the enclosure. This is also beneficial for the tegu, so it's a win-win!

Heating

Unlike humans, tegus and other reptiles are cold-blooded, which means that they need access to external heat for their bodies to work properly. Heat should come from above, and should mimic sunlight as closely as

possible. And because they're poikilotherms, they need a gradient of temperatures inside their enclosure so they can warm up and cool down as needed:

- **Basking surface — 125-135°F**
- **Cool side — 72-82°F**

Tegus are big lizards, so you will need a large basking area as well to evenly heat their body. Use a cluster of at least four high-wattage halogen flood bulbs placed close enough to heat evenly, but not overlap too much. If the bulbs are getting a little too hot, use plug-in lamp dimmers to dial down the heat. If they are much too hot, then you need lower-wattage bulbs.

How do you make sure you're doing it right? Don't get a cheap gauge-type stick-on thermometer — these aren't very accurate. Instead, use an infrared temperature gun like the Etekcity 774 to measure surface temperature anywhere in the enclosure.

Heating should be turned off at night. Tegus are capable of easily withstanding nighttime temperatures down to 65°F without triggering brumation.

Humidity

All life on Earth depends on water. Animals can get it either by drinking it, eating food that contains water, or by breathing humid air. Reptiles need specific levels of humidity in their environment for best health, and Argentine tegus do best with average humidity levels between 70-80%.

Due to the size of the enclosure, it's best practice to use an automatic misting system to maintain appropriate humidity levels. Due to the deep soil and use of live plants, bioactive setups are excellent at maintaining high humidity compared to other options.

Humidity will naturally be higher on the cool side of the enclosure than on the warm side, so use a Bio Dude Digital Thermometer / Hygrometer with the probe placed in the middle of the enclosure to track average humidity levels in your tegu's habitat.

Substrate

"Substrate" is another word for bedding. Tegus like to dig (and it helps keep their nails filed), so you will need at *least* 4-6 inches of deep, loose substrate — preferably more. If you want a bioactive setup for your Argentine tegu, then you will need to use a bioactive-compatible substrate ready to nourish plants and CUC long-term.

If you want to make your own mix, you need a soil-like mix that mimics the conditions of your tegu's natural habitat. You can make your own with 60% plain topsoil, 20% peat, and 20% play sand, mixed with leaf litter and sphagnum moss until fluffy. Alternative, you can let The Bio Dude do the work for you with the Terra Firma Bioactive Kit! For best results, combine with an appropriate amount of Bio Dude Bio Shot.

Bioactive substrates need a clean-up crew (CUC) of beneficial bugs to work properly. At very least you will need relatively large cultures of tropical springtails and isopods such as powder blues, powder oranges, or dwarf purples. You can also add other species like superworms and earthworms for variety.

For best results, let your bioactive substrate and any live plants get established for at least a month before adding your tegu

Décor: Environmental Enrichment

Enclosure décor is more than just making your setup look nice. It's also an important part of providing *environmental enrichment* to your tegu, 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 Argentine tegu's bioactive enclosure:

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

Note that live plants are required for a healthy, functional bioactive setup. Due to tegus' size and strength, small trees, shrubs, and aggressive groundcovers are the best plants to use. However, check to make sure that any plant you use is not known to be toxic to reptiles, in case your tegu decides to take a bite.

Planning and setting up *enrichment activities* is also essential to preventing frustration and stress, and generally keeping your tegu happy and engaged.

Feeding Your Argentine Tegu

Argentine tegus are omnivores, which means that they need to eat both plant and animal matter to be healthy. And like humans, their nutritional needs change as they grow.

- **Hatchlings (0-6 months)** — 5x/week (70-80% protein, 20-30% vegetables and fruit)
- **Juveniles (7-12 months)** — 4x/week (70-80% protein, 20-30% vegetables and fruit)
- **Subadults (1-2 years)** — 3x/week (70-80% protein, 20-30% vegetables and fruit)
- **Adults (>2 years)** — 2x/week (60% protein, 30% vegetables, 10% fruit)

Each meal should be about the same size as the tegu's skull.

The key to success with tegus (and most reptiles, for that matter) is to feed them as large a variety of foods as possible. The below options are just a small sample list. For a more comprehensive list of feeding options, and which foods to avoid, visit [ReptiFiles](#).

Animals

Meat

- eggs, with shell
- chicks
- quail
- mice
- rats
- gerbils
- young guinea pigs
- young rabbits
- high quality dog food

Insects

- crickets
- dubia roaches
- discoid roaches
- black soldier fly larvae
- mealworms
- superworms
- hornworms
- silkworms
- snails
- grasshoppers

Feeder insects should be at least slightly smaller than the tegu's head. ALL FEEDER INSECTS SHOULD BE DUSTED WITH CALCIUM SUPPLEMENT BEFORE OFFERING!

Plants

- collard greens
- cactus pads
- spring mix
- arugula
- kale
- pea shoots
- alfalfa
- bok choy
- carrot greens and roots
- spinach
- dandelion greens/flowers
- hibiscus leaves/flowers

Fruits should be used as treats only due to their high sugar content. Options include berries, figs, apples, prickly pear, papaya, and mango.

Calcium & Vitamins

To ensure that your tegu is getting all the vitamins and minerals they need, you need a calcium powder and a multivitamin powder. Take care not to use these too often; too much vitamins can be just as deadly as too little. We recommend Miner-ALL Outdoor (no D3) dusted on all insects and Exo Terra Reptile Multivitamin sprinkled on food 1-2x/month.

Drinking Water

Aside from humid air in their environment, tegus also need a water dish so they can drink water as needed. They can drink a lot, so you will need a very large dish. Where possible, it is ideal to use a tub of water large enough for them to soak in as desired. The water bowl should be kept clean at all times and disinfected weekly or whenever soiled.

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

