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Caring For A Pet Snake

By Gary Ruplinger

When people think of pets, most of the time "furry" and "cuddly" are adjectives that come to mind.

For the owners of pet snakes, however, these words don't really fit. Still, snakes make interesting pets, and can even be lovable – in their own way.

Choosing to own a pet snake should not be a snap decision. Snakes can grow large, eat a lot, and require very specific conditions for staying healthy. Some varieties can even be dangerous to humans. Providing for their needs can be quite expensive. To top it all off, snakes tend to have a long lifespan. For the sake of the snake, don't buy one without being sure you are ready to make the commitment.

All snakes are meat-eaters. Many snake owners keep live mice or rats, which multiply rapidly, as food for their snakes. It is recommended that snakes be fed pre-killed prey animals instead of live ones. Especially if the snake is not real hungry, a live prey animal can inflict injuries to the snake. Many snake enthusiasts order frozen mice for their snakes. Others raise mice and kill them as needed to feed their snakes.

The good part of feeding a snake is that most shouldn't be fed more often than once a week and some can go for several weeks between feedings. The reason is that they don't have to expend any energy creating their own body heat. In fact, if the cage is not warm enough, a snake can't even digest its food.

The enclosure, or cage, for the snake needs to be first of all escape proof. Snakes are escape artists, and don't need a very big opening in order to find a way out. The cage also has to have a source of heat. Because they are cold blooded, snakes must have a variety of temperatures to choose from. This is how they regulate their body heat. For best results, the enclosure should be heated on one side only and thermometers used on both ends. Each snake species has specific needs in terms of heat, and you should find out these needs before getting a snake.

Other needs include a bowl of water, several places to hide, and a floor lining. If you're on a tight budget, newspaper works well for most snake varieties. It can easily be replaced when soiled. The water should be kept clean, too. Any wastes or uneaten food should be removed quickly. The cage

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should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected about once a month.

Keeping a pet snake is a responsibility that can also be an adventure. If you are a beginner, you should start with one of the easier snakes to keep. Do a little research, and you will find out that pet snake breeds are generally rated according to how hard they are to keep. In time, you will learn the ins and outs of snake keeping, and can expand your collection to include some of the more exotic types.

Gary Ruplinger is the owner of Boatips, a site providing great information about pet snakes. To learn more about snake care, visit us at

<http://www.boatips.com/snakecare/>

and be sure to check out the rest

of the site,

<http://www.boatips.com>

, as well.

Setting Up An Enclosure For A Snake

By Gary Ruplinger

Maybe they're not exactly cuddly, but snakes make interesting pets. Regardless of the type of snake, from nice little corn snakes up to monster Burmese pythons, there are some principles that apply to setting up a cage or enclosure for a pet snake. One of the most important aspects is to make sure the enclosure is absolutely escape-proof.

Snakes are known to have Houdini tendencies when it comes to staying confined. Aquariums make good enclosures for snakes, but the lids have to fit tightly and be clipped on. Some owners make belts to attach around the enclosure for more security. Any doors or openings in the cage need to fit tightly or the snake will push against it trying to get out. Remember, most of them are pretty slim, so they don't need that big of an opening to slip out.

The size of the enclosure should reflect the size of the snake. Many babies are insecure in a large cage and even have trouble finding their food. It's usually advisable to put young snakes in smaller enclosures. To choose a size of cage for an adult snake, first measure the length of the snake. Get an enclosure with a perimeter that measures twice the length of the snake. For instance, a three foot long snake would do OK in an enclosure 12 by 24 inches.

The exception to the above rule is arboreal, or tree-dwelling, snakes. These need a taller enclosure with lots of branches for climbing.

A snake enclosure needs a material to cover the bottom, called a substrate. Newspaper can line the

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bottom of the enclosure, and makes a cheap surface that absorbs moisture and is easy to change when soiled. There are also special types of carpeting available at the pet store to use as a substrate. If you have two that fit, you can use one while washing the other.

Temperature is very important in a snake enclosure. Snakes are cold-blooded animals, and have to keep warm from outside sources. Ideally, a pet snake's cage will provide several choices in temperature so the animal can regulate its body heat. This is done by heating one end of the enclosure only. Heating methods include heating pads under half of the enclosure or heat lamps. If using a light, it will need to be off during the night hours.

Thermometers should be used to monitor the inside temperature. Requirements vary from one species to another. A pet store product called a "hot rock" is widely discouraged because it has a tendency to burn pet snakes. Using a heat lamp or infrared heating panel is a far better way to provide the snake with heat. Some snakes have specific humidity requirements, too. A hygrometer can be used to monitor humidity. Misting the enclosure from time to time can help keep it more humid when necessary.

The snake will need a water bowl. Ideally it should not tip easily. For most varieties of snake, it should be large enough to take a soak once in awhile. Keeping it only about a third full helps avoid soaking the substrate. Pottery and wide based pet food dishes work well for water bowls.

A final necessity in the enclosure is a place for the snake to hide. This can be as simple as a plastic dish with a hole cut in the side. Having two, one on each end of the enclosure, gives the snake a

choice. Setting up a nice enclosure takes a little time and money, but will ensure your snake has comfort and security.

Gary Ruplinger is the owner of Boatips, a site providing great information about pet snakes. To learn more about setting up a snake habitat, visit us at

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and check

out our boa constrictors page at

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