

Pets are an important part of the American household. Your pet-owning experience will be most enjoyable if you carefully consider which pet best suits your family, home and lifestyle. Unfulfilled expectations are a leading cause of pet relinquishment, so make an informed decision. Take time, involve your family, and give careful consideration to the following questions.

What's special about reptiles?

Reptiles include some of the most ancient species on Earth. They are colorful and interesting. They live in many different environments and have developed fascinating adaptations to survive in water and on land and by changing skin color. Some reptiles (e.g., many types of snakes) only eat once a week, making it easier to care for them when you are away. In general, reptiles require less daily care and exercise than other pets such as cats and dogs.

What choices do you have?



There are many options for choosing a reptile as a pet, including varieties of lizards, snakes, and turtles. Some species live mostly in the water, others mostly on land and many live in both. Depending on the species, reptiles can be herbivores (plant-eating), insectivores (insect-eating), or carnivores (meat-eating). Many have more than one type of diet and may even change from one diet to another in different phases of their life.

What are the special needs of reptiles?

Reptile needs vary with the species. In general, reptiles cannot control their own body temperature, and must be housed in an environment with a specific range of temperatures that are known to be best for that species. Humidity ranges are just as important as temperature, and can be more difficult for many people to duplicate (especially during winter in cold climates). Proper type and amount of lighting is important for a reptile's well-being, as is proper housing, since many reptiles outgrow their initial tanks as they mature.

Since each reptile species is unique, thoroughly research the animal you want as a pet before you purchase one. Learn what is known about the reptile's natural habitat

(e.g., diet, environmental conditions) as well as how experienced reptile owners have cared for that species. Someone who has successfully bred the reptile in captivity can often provide good advice as will veterinarians whose special interest is reptiles.

It is important to provide the correct environment for your pet. Some reptiles are climbers and require vertical caging and branches, whereas others prefer to live on flat surfaces with hiding spaces. Some like to burrow, while others spend most of their lives in water. Some reptiles also need to hibernate. Most reptiles shed their skin as they grow, and usually cannot be handled or disturbed during this process.

Make sure you are able to feed the reptile you select an appropriate diet; for example, you should not get a carnivorous snake if you know you will not be comfortable feeding it meat such as mice or rats. While reptiles are often considered predators, there are species of animals that prey on reptiles and many people fail to consider this source of stress for their pet reptile. For example, because some snakes eat other snakes it isn't good to house these two types in the same room. Even dogs, cats, birds and other family pets may cause stress for your pet reptile.

Who will care for your reptile?



a petsitter may be a challenge.

There is also a human health risk to consider when housing a reptile. Since many reptiles can carry the *Salmonella* bacteria that can cause illness in people, good hygiene must be followed when handling reptiles. Children may be at higher risk of infection unless they

are adequately supervised and taught to follow good cleanliness practices around their pet.

Does a reptile fit your lifestyle?

Reptiles can be excellent alternatives for people who are allergic to furred or feathered animals. Many reptiles appear to enjoy human handling and interaction while some, even of the same species, prefer to be left alone and observed, although they will often form a strong bond with the person who takes care of them. Research the animal you select to learn about its general care, lifespan, and how large it may grow. For example, many iguanas grow to be three to four feet long and may be more difficult to handle when larger and sexually mature. As they grow, many reptiles' needs for caging and care change and these changes will impact how suitable that animal is for your lifestyle.

Most reptiles depend on the sun to keep them warm and to help regulate their metabolic functions, such as their immune system and calcium levels. They often do much better in warmer climates where they can live outdoors most of their lives. It may be difficult to duplicate the reptile's ideal living conditions inside your home.

Many reptiles will bite and some are venomous. Some reptiles, although attractive and unique, are inappropriate pets because they are dangerous. Permits may be required to keep certain reptiles and some species are prohibited as pets in various states and municipalities and under some housing rules.

Can you afford a reptile?

Prices of reptiles vary greatly with species, rarity, age, size, and coloration. Often supplies for their housing are more expensive than the reptile itself as many species require larger enclosures as they mature and grow. Some will require lighting fixtures with special bulbs that need to be replaced every 6 to 12 months. In addition, while many reptiles need fresh vegetables daily, others must be fed live insects (such as worms or crickets) and carnivores require the regular purchase of feeder mice, rats, chicks, or rabbits for their food. Since reptiles, like other pets, may become ill and require surgery or other veterinary care during their lifetime, routine veterinary visits are important.

Where can you get a reptile?



Most people obtain reptiles at pet stores, reptile shows, or, occasionally, from shelters or rescue groups. Most common pet reptiles are bred in captivity, but some are

illegally taken from their environment and sold as pets. You should inquire about this at your pet store or the reptile show, so you don't encourage illegal trade.

How can you select a healthy reptile?

Reptiles bred and raised in captivity as future pets are likely to be healthier and live longer than those captured in the wild, and their purchase supports responsible reptile breeding and management.

Unless you plan to breed your reptile, it is generally best to keep only one species as a pet. They often become territorial or aggressive when sexually mature, and may even be stressed to see other animals. Become familiar with the normal weight, coloration, and activities of the species you want prior to purchase. Carefully look over the animal you are considering buying. You should not see any external parasites, such as mites or ticks, and the reptile's eyes should be clear. Ask about its diet and if the reptile has been eating (if not, there may be a health problem). The skin sheen and color varies greatly by species, age, and time until shed.



What must you do to prepare for your reptile?

Not only is your veterinarian (especially one with special knowledge about reptiles) best qualified to evaluate the health of your new companion, but they can advise you about proper nutrition, parasite control, socialization, housing, grooming and other care that

may be necessary to ensure the health and welfare of your new pet. Schedule an initial wellness exam so your veterinarian can evaluate the general health of your new pet reptile and check for external parasites (as well as internal parasites through a fecal sample). Since new animals should be quarantined for at least a month and kept away from other reptiles in the household, your veterinarian can determine when it is safe to introduce the new reptile.

If you find your reptile is no longer an appropriate pet for your family, contact your veterinarian, reptile specialist, or local animal control office for help in finding it a new home. Never release the reptile into the outdoors where it will not survive and could present a health risk to people or other animals.

When you acquire a pet, you accept responsibility for the health and welfare of another living thing. You are also responsible for your pet's impact on your family, friends, and community. A pet will be part of your life for many years. Invest the time and effort necessary to make your years together happy ones. When you choose a pet, you are promising to care for it for its entire life. Choose wisely, keep your promise, and enjoy one of life's most rewarding experiences!

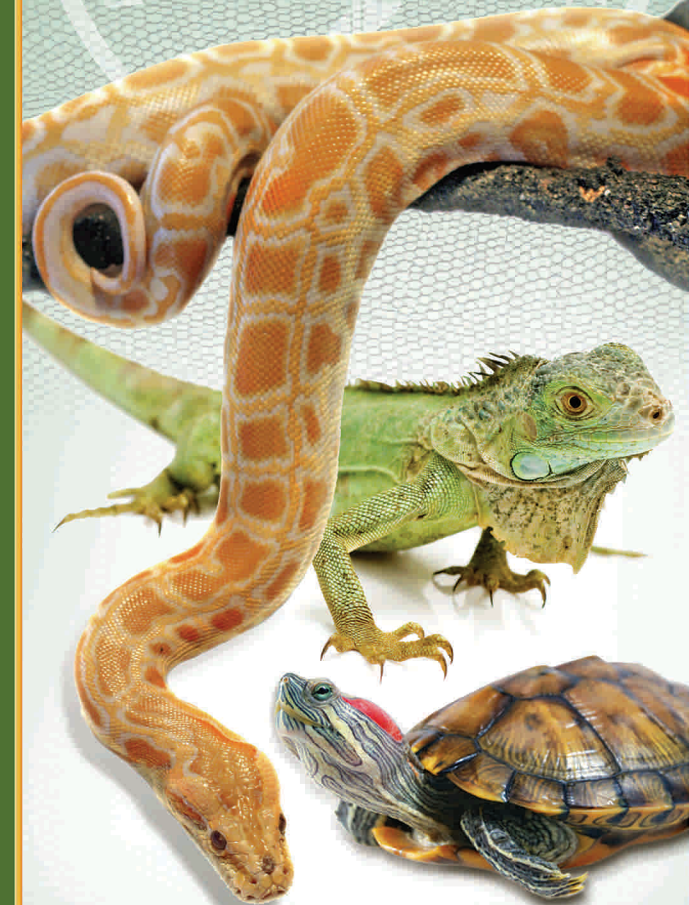
To locate a veterinarian with a special interest in reptiles, visit
Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians
www.arav.org



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What you should know about Selecting a Reptile



CARING FOR ANIMALS
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