

Reptiles as Pets

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I want to get a pet reptile for my young son. He's allergic to dogs and cats. What animal would be a good choice?

Being able to have a special animal friend is a very good way for children to learn responsibility. Since I do not know the age of your son, or his level of maturity, and understanding, we will just go through a short list of the pros and cons and needs of several species.

All parents should be willing to accept full responsibility for the animal's care, and at the same time teach their kids about the special needs of the pet. Don't ever depend on younger children to fully care for the pet without constant monitoring of the situation yourselves. This will ensure that the critters meet their wants and needs, and that nothing should go wrong arising out of lack of proper attention. You know how kids are. They get busy, they forget, their well meaning interests today may shift toward something else tomorrow. As a veterinarian you just wouldn't believe all the things I have seen that spell a serious disaster for so many reptile pets. These things could have been avoided altogether by a little supervision from the parents.

Reptiles come in three basic families, that of the turtle, the lizard and the snake. For a moment, let me get on my soapbox and preach. Do not buy any reptile unless you are certain that they have been bred in captivity. That animal should have never known what being free in the wild was like and then to be captured, caged and sold as a pet. In my opinion, it is dead wrong, and cruel to do this to a wild creature. They don't make good pets. They are almost always fearful, don't eat well, have many parasites, and do not want to be handled. This contrasts the many reptiles that have been bred in captivity, and do not know the freedom of the real world. There are many reliable reptile breeders that sell directly or through quality pet stores.

The reptile you want must be easily kept in a sufficiently large habitat that is affordable, and not too small. Many stores will try to convince you that only a small box is required. It is paramount that you first study the species or breed you want. Know all its needs, its food preferences, its temperature, humidity and light requirements, and how big the bloody thing will get when it gets older! Animal adoption groups are full of orphans because folks give up their pet realizing after they obtained it that they had not realized what they were getting into.

The turtle family comes in many sizes and shapes. There are two broad classes of turtles. One lives in the dry land to semi-moist environment, and the other lives all or most of their lives in the water. If you choose a water turtle you will need to have excellent water quality just as for a larger fish aquarium. Most water turtle illnesses are directly related to the ability to keep the water environment clean. The land turtles also need clean pens, along with the right amount of full spectrum light and supplemental heaters. For all

reptiles I will recommend a piece of indoor/outdoor carpet as bedding at the bottom of the cage. The rug comes in three colors, tan, green, or gray. I will choose the color based on the original habitat that the animal lived in. Always have two pieces so that one can be replaced easily when cage cleaning, and the other piece is getting scrubbed.

There are herbivores or mostly plant eating turtles, and there are meat eating carnivorous turtles. Sometimes you will find omnivorous turtles who feed on meat and vegetable materials. Turtles for the most part live very long lives with 75 years being common place. So you see, it is paramount that once this responsibility is taken on that you will see the pet through its entire life. The most common turtles available are red eared sliders and box turtles. Red eared sliders are water turtles. They are the ones that used to be sold in the Woolworth store by the hundreds, for small change, and almost always died. They come from the southeast part of the country. Those little turtles get larger with age and eventually will need an outdoor pond in good weather. Box turtles come from the midwest to eastern United States. They live a very long time, well over 70 years. They are called box turtles because the bottom shell can be brought up tight at both front and back to form a snug box-like house. They can be kept outdoors in good weather in an escape proof pen, and must be brought inside when it's cold. They will want to hibernate for the winter as wild turtles do, but they should be kept warm, and awake to avoid losing them. Most people cannot properly hibernate a box turtle. Most turtles need 70-85 degrees F temperatures, and a good 12-14 hours of full spectrum light. Do not use hot rocks for any pet reptile. The hot rocks often overheat and burn your pet badly. I have one client that cares for Timmy, a breed of turtle originally living in Honduras. Timmy's people are very knowledgeable, and have gone to great lengths to give him a quality life in captivity. They were so upset when they found out Timmy may have been captured from the wild, that they vowed that his captive habitat would be as good as that found in the wild. Well, no one this side of Honduras can make life better than the wild, but Timmy has got it pretty darn good. If I were a turtle I'd like to go live at their house.

The next class of reptile is the lizard family. These guys don't carry their own house on their backs like turtles so they need areas to bask in artificial sun lamps, and places to hide when they need to feel secure. There are many breeds that are popular and kept as pets. Some of these are green iguanas, various types of geckos (no not Geicos), chameleons which can change their color according to mood, and whatever they are next to, and the latest craze, the bearded dragon. I probably see a ratio of 5:1 more lizards than snakes and turtles combined. There is such a range of habitats and needs in this group, but the majority need lots of full spectrum light including the ultraviolet rays missing in most regular light bulbs. Some people think they can put them in a sunny window and that is enough. These animals absolutely must have good supplemental lighting. These lights and fixtures are very expensive, but worth the trouble. The lizards all obtain their Vitamin D through the skin. Full spectrum light with UV rays must shine on the skin long enough for the Vitamin D to be synthesized, and absorbed into the liver. Without this necessary Vit D, the calcium metabolism is fraught with failure, and their bones will become soft and brittle, leading to a metabolic bone disease called rickets. The green iguana is one of the most personable and endearing pet lizards, but they become extremely large with age. They have very specialized herbivorous diets and require a huge habitat. They literally take over a small room. The males become aggressive during breeding season, and the females always want to lay eggs. They are a lot of trouble and

are the most common reptile given back up for adoption. Therefore, I do not recommend an iguana to any but the most sincere and dedicated. The (Geico) geckos are popular but watch that large, fat, fleshy tail. It will pull off very easily, (it is an escape safety feature), and then you have half your pet wriggling away, while the front half runs off the other way. Chameleons are fascinating creatures with their eyes that swivel in a full circle independently of each other, and that ability to change to almost any color or pattern in just a few seconds. Their sticky tongue shoots out many inches to catch prey insects, and they rarely miss.

Lastly, the snake family, probably the least respected or admired of all the reptiles. Their existence is mired in all types of lore. To some they represent the embodiment of evil or that which is to be feared. There are many breeds kept as pets. The most common are the pythons and boas. Some of these attain a huge size, up to 20 feet, and well over 300 pounds. There are laws on the books to prevent folks from keeping these larger snakes. The smaller ball python makes a satisfactory pet. Remember that the snake is carnivorous and will need to be fed mice, or rats. Although I understand that this diet is what nature designed for the snake it still bothers me intensely, as I have many clients who love their pet mouse or rat dearly. It just doesn't seem right to me to discuss feeding issues with a client who feeds the snake the poor hapless prey animal, when just an hour before I had doctored his pet relatives to become more healthy.

Of all the reptiles the snakes do well in smaller habitats. They do a great deal of sitting around waiting anyway in the real world, so they do fine in much smaller cages than do the lizards and turtles. Vitamins and mineral must be supplemented to turtles and lizards, but are not required in snakes as their prey items are already a full meal deal.

There is a local society of herp enthusiasts called the Pacific Northwest Herp Society. There you will find experts in every species of reptile. It is a great resource to become affiliated with, and I highly recommend it. Contact them at www.pnhs.net or (206)-628-4740

Future columns will cover all the other animal species kept as pets.