

General Care of Pet Snakes



THE VIVARIUM (HOUSING YOUR SNAKE)

Vivarium is basically a name for your snakes captive living environment. For a snake a vivarium can be a wooden cabinet style enclosure with sliding glass doors at the front, for viewing your snake and gaining easy access, and vents in the back or sides for air flow.

It can also be a plastic 'pet home', as sold in most pet stores, although these are only suitable for small or very young snakes.

Your vivarium can be an aquarium with a well ventilated and escape proof lid. Some shops sell specially made lids for aquariums designed with reptiles in mind.

The vivarium can also be as cheap and simple as a clear or opaque plastic storage box with plenty of ventilation holes drilled or soldered in to the sides, although some more active diurnal or arboreal species of snake may not cope well in these boxes.

Whatever type of vivarium you choose must be escape proof, ventilated and large enough for your snake to live in comfortably.

HEATING AND TEMPERATURE

Most snakes kept in captivity require supplemental heat of some sort. Probably the most popular device used to keep snakes warm is the heat mat. Heat mats can be bought from the majority of shops that sell reptiles or can be purchased online. Heat mats can be placed under the floor of the vivarium and simply plugged in to the wall.

Make sure you follow the manufacturers installation and safety instructions.

Heat mats are available in a variety of different sizes suitable for heating most vivarium sizes and work by gently warming the substrate at ground level, providing the snake with a place to bask, very similar to a sun - heated spot in the wild.

A thermostat should be used to control the heat output of the mat to keep the temperature at a safe comfortable level for the snake in question.

Heat mats should cover between 1/3 and 1/2 of the vivarium floor, this creates a thermal gradient so that one side of the vivarium is warmer than the other, giving your snake a choice of temperature.

Other heating choices include heat strips, heat cables, heat bulbs, hot rocks and ceramic heaters (usually for larger vivariums). The important thing is that whatever you choose can keep your vivarium at the correct temperature for the snake species without over or under heating the enclosure. It is always best to use a thermostat to keep temperatures at the desired level for the snake species in question.

Thermometers placed in both the warmest and coolest areas of your snakes enclosure are essential for checking temperatures are within the required range needed for your snake.

Most snakes benefit from a drop of temperature at night but you should ensure that this never falls below 19c (Unless you are brumating your snakes ready for breeding). Refer to the care sheets section to find the optimum temperature requirements for the species of snake you intend to keep.

LIGHTING

Lighting is not essential for most snake species, providing they are kept in a well lit room with a window. You may however like to use light bulbs or tubes to illuminate your snakes enclosure in the daytime or to provide a little extra air temperature if necessary. Be careful if using light bulbs for heat, as even a 25 watt bulb can give off a surprising amount of heat in a confined space,

Always use thermometers to check temperatures no matter what type of heating or thermostatic control is used.

NOTE: Bulbs rated 25watts or higher should be covered with a bulb guard to prevent the chance of burns to your pet snake.

All lighting must be turned off at night. You can leave lighting on for 12 hours and off for 12 hours or recreate the particular snakes natural light cycles. It is best to purchase a plug - in timer to control the lights, these are inexpensive and will save a lot of trouble.

SUBSTRATE

Substrate is the name for the material lining the floor of your snakes vivarium. This can be as simple as paper towels or newspaper. Both are very cheap and practical and allow for easy cleaning as they can be easily replaced when soiled. The downside is that neither of these is very aesthetically pleasing.

Wood chips or shavings make a very good substrate for many snake species although care must be taken that not too much substrate is ingested when the snake is eating, as this can cause intestinal impaction. Some shops now sell specially made 'reptile bedding' designed specifically for reptiles that, if swallowed in small amounts at feeding time it will pass through the snakes digestive system with no problems.

Orchid bark is another good attractive substrate especially for rainforest species, although it is usually sold untreated which means you will need to disinfect it at home as it may have unwanted pests living in it. Freezing the bark overnight at -18 degrees centigrade is an effective way of eliminating pests before introducing the substrate to the vivarium.

Sand is a good substrate for desert species but again care should be taken that not too much is accidentally ingested by the snake at feeding time. One option is to feed your snake in a separate container.

There are many possibilities and it is up to you what you use for your particular snake species, as long as it is comfortable, dry, absorbs waste and keeps the vivarium floor clean. Ask your local reptile dealer what they have available.

1/2 to 1 inch of substrate is suitable for most species of snake but more depth may be necessary for strongly terrestrial or fossorial species.

NOTE: Do not use anything that is made with cedar as this is toxic to snakes in a confined space.

FURNISHINGS

Your snakes vivarium can be furnished to make it more aesthetically pleasing and a more interesting environment for your snake to explore.

Naturalistic backgrounds, vines, driftwood, branches, plastic plants, and pieces of bark can all be used to furnish your snakes vivarium and provide places for your snake to hide or explore.

You may like to furnish the enclosure to mirror the environment your snake originated from, eg. Leaves, branches and pieces of bark for forest species.

HIDES

A sense of security is very important for snakes and at least one place in the vivarium to hide completely out of view is a necessity. Two hides is better if there is room.

Specially made hides for reptiles can be bought from pet shops or you can make your own with items such as margarine tubs with an entrance hole cut in the top or side, just large enough for the snake to slip in to.

There are lots of items that can be used as or converted in to snake hides; flower pots, plastic piping, bark pieces etc. The important thing is that it is just large enough for your snake to fit snugly inside. If the hide is too large and roomy your snake won't feel secure.

If using two hides in the vivarium, put one in the warm end and one in the cool end of your snakes vivarium. (See Heating and Temperature section above for information on thermal gradients). If only using one hide then place nearer the cool end.

WATER

Drinking water is an absolute necessity. It should be in a sturdy dish with straight sides and shallow enough for your snake to gain easy access. For most species the water dish should be large enough for your snake to soak in if it wishes. This will help your snake when it is due to shed its skin or when it needs to cool down.

Water should be changed at least twice a week or when soiled.

The water dish should be cleaned and disinfected once a week or when soiled, using a reptile specific disinfectant or with a solution of 95% water and 5% thin household bleach. The water dish should then be rinsed thoroughly in cold water.

Your snake must have access to water at all times.

HUMIDITY

Most snakes have humidity requirements in the 45 to 65% range.

Humidity can be raised or lowered by changing the location of the water dish. eg. Place the water dish in the warm end of the enclosure for higher humidity or the cool end for lower humidity.

Humidity can also be raised by mist spraying (using a spray bottle once or twice a day to spray a water mist in to the snakes vivarium (don't over spray or dampen the substrate) to raise humidity.)

Another option is to make a humid hide which is a plastic box or container with an entrance hole cut in the side and part filled with moist sphagnum moss or damp paper towels. This should be placed in a warm area in the vivarium. This allows the snake to slither in and out of a humid environment when it desires, while keeping the rest of the vivarium dry.

Humidity can be measured using a hygrometer which can be bought cheaply at most shops that deal in reptiles.

SHEDDING

Snakes shed their skins on a regular basis. 4 to 8 times a year is average for an adult snake. Shedding (or sloughing) occurs more often when snakes are young and grow out of their skins very quickly.

Snakes will shed their skins to accommodate growth or to replace old damaged skin and it is best to leave your snakes alone without handling or feeding during the uncomfortable shedding cycle.

You can tell if your snake is going to shed, the snakes eyes will turn a milky blue colour and the skin will be duller. After a couple of days the eyes will return to normal coloration and a few days later the skin will be shed, usually in one piece. If you own a snake that sheds its skin in lots of little pieces or fails to shed its skin completely then you are probably keeping the humidity level in the vivarium too low.

It is helpful to your snake if you provide a humid hide (A plastic box with an entrance hole that is part filled with moist paper towels or sphagnum moss) if your snake is due to shed; or alternatively raise the overall humidity by 10% during the shedding cycle.

See the section above titled 'Humidity' for tips on raising and lowering humidity.

FEEDING

Most snakes available in the pet trade will eat mice or rats, which can be bought frozen at pet shops that stock reptiles. It is important that the rats or mice you intend to feed are thawed thoroughly. They can simply be left at room temperature till thawed or thawed more quickly in warm water.

Most adult snakes do well on one food item weekly. The food item should be as thick as the thickest part of your snakes body.

Juvenile snakes grow rapidly and should be fed roughly twice as much as adult snakes until they reach adulthood (18mths - 2 years). Snakes will continue to grow when adults but much more slowly.

The above feeding regime is a rough guide and you will have to use your initiative by keeping a close eye on your snakes weight. If your snake is losing weight but eating well it probably needs to be fed more.

A fat snake may have vertical creases along its scales and skin showing between the scales. If your snake is obese it may not even be capable of curling up properly when resting. If your snake is too thin its backbone will be prominent and ribs may be visible.

WARNING: Although some young snakes will eat just about as much food as you can give them, overfeeding juvenile snakes can be bad for their long term health.

Rats and mice are available frozen in many different sizes from babies (pinkies) to adults from good reptile stores or online. Other widely available frozen snake foods include chicks, gerbils or rabbits for larger species. Frozen fish such as Lance fish can be bought for fish-eating snakes such as Garter and Ribbon snakes.

Feeding your snake in a different container, away from the vivarium can be a good idea if you don't want your pet to think that food is on offer every time you open the vivarium doors as this can occasionally result in accidental bites.

An often used way of feeding snakes is to wriggle food in front of your snake using a pair of long tweezers or tongs until your snake strikes, then leave the snake to eat. For shy or nervous snakes you may have to leave the food on the vivarium floor in front of the hide and then leave the room and let the snake eat in complete privacy, without disturbance.

Most snakes tend to feed best at dusk but you may need to experiment to find the most successful time for your particular snake.

CLEANING

Probably the most important aspect of snake husbandry is to keep your snake in a clean and hygienic living environment.

There are several 'reptile specific' cleaning products on the market which are very effective but quite expensive. (Be sure to read instructions before use).

An alternative is to use a solution of 95% water and 5% thin household bleach (unscented).

Water bowls should be cleaned with a cloth and mildly soapy water and then soaked for several minutes in one of the above cleaning solutions and then rinsed thoroughly in cold water. Do this at least once a week and change the water at least twice a week. The substrate should be changed once a month (more often if using newspaper) and at this time you should also clean and disinfect the vivarium and all the furnishings using one of the aforementioned cleaning solutions. Make sure everything is rinsed thoroughly before drying. Also make sure everything is completely dry before introducing your snake back to its vivarium.

Faeces should be removed as soon as it is spotted as should old skin.

The majority of snake illness is caused by poor living conditions so it is well worth taking the time to ensure a clean environment for your pet snake.