

Green Iguana



The common or green iguana has been gaining popularity as an exotic pet for several years. Unfortunately, misinformation and naivete about the true needs of this species have led to many sick animals and disappointed owners. This paper will discuss the latest, and most reliable ways to raise a happy, healthy iguana.

Green iguanas are striking creatures, found in the wild from northern Mexico to central South America. This species of lizard is arboreal and diurnal, and enjoys being in close proximity to streams and rivers (they are excellent swimmers). If nutrition is appropriate, iguanas can reach an impressive 6 and ½ feet within 3-5 years of hatching. Dewlaps hanging from the throats of iguanas help them to regulate their body temperature. The crest of soft spines on the neck and back, and the femoral pores on the underside of the rear legs are more prominent in males. When young, iguanas are a bright green color, which softens to earthy tones or a beautiful bluish-green hue when mature. They have strong jaws, a long tail and sharp claws, all used for defense if threatened. The claws of captive iguanas should be filed (not cut) regularly, for the safety of the owner. Iguanas are sexually mature at 2 years of age and their normal breeding season is from November through March.

The key to raising a healthy iguana in captivity is mimicking as closely as possible the diet and environment they would have if they were wild. It is highly important that their diet contain no animal protein.

These lizards are folivores, and thrive on variety. Therefore, offering a mixture from the list below should be enjoyable to them.

The majority of the diet should include: dark, leafy greens (kale, escarole, Swiss chard, mustard or turnip tops, Romaine lettuce, bok choy), flowers of dandelions, hibiscus, nasturtium, carnation, rose, and clover, thawed frozen mixed vegetables, peas in the pod, and shredded sweet potatoes, carrots, and squashes.

Smaller quantities of the following fruits should be offered: berries (particularly blueberries), plums, peaches, pears, grapes, melons, and apples.

Bananas and iceberg lettuce should be avoided.

Iguanas can be finicky eaters, so it is suggested to make a salad of some of the above ingredients, cutting the food into very small pieces, and offering this dusted with a small amount of calcium carbonate. Every 4th to 6th feeding, the dusting should be done with a high-quality reptile mineral supplement, such as Reocal with D3. Adult iguanas should be fed at least three times a week, and given fresh water for drinking and soaking daily.

The housing that you provide your iguana should follow some specific guidelines. Its ambient temperature should range between 75-90 F, with a basking area of 95-105 F. Adjacent to this area, and within 18 inches of the iguana, should be a black light and an ultraviolet light, which is essential for calcium metabolism. Providing 10-12 hours of daylight and 12-14 hours of darkness daily, with a gradual increase in daylight hours in the spring, and a gradual decrease in autumn can mimic a natural photoperiod. When sunlight can be provided without interference of glass or plastic (i.e., windows) it is excellent for your iguana. A 50-gallon aquarium or custom-built enclosure is best for this rapidly growing species. It should be kept very clean with disinfectants, but the pine oil varieties are highly toxic to iguanas and should be avoided. The safest substrates for the vivarium are newspaper, paper toweling, or Astroturf. Sand, gravel, moss, and the like should not be used, as they may lead to a plethora of health problems, and are hard to keep sanitary. Heavy branches and rocks will provide nice perches, but good hiding areas should be provided as well. Hot rocks should not be used, as they can cause serious burns, and all lighting fixtures should be covered with protective grids for the same reason.

Iguanas can become obese easily, so regular exercise is important. They will enjoy swimming in a shallow, warm tub, and can be walked outside in summer months on specially designed harnesses. Any house roaming must be supervised, as there are many dangers in store for the inquisitive iguana.

Common ailments iguanas face include metabolic bone disease, fractures of toes and tails (never restrain an iguana by the tail!), egg-binding, abscesses, abrasions from face-rubbing, mouth rot, parasites, bladder stones, and bite wounds (they are territorial creatures). A good reptile veterinarian will instruct you in ways to prevent and/or treat these problems. It is advisable to have your iguana examined annually. Routine bloodwork, fecal exams, and deworming are important in giving your exotic pet a good, healthy start.
