

# Care of Reptiles

## Live Material Care Guide



### Background

Relatively easy to maintain and fascinating to observe, reptiles are great specimens for study in the life science or biology classroom. Since they lack the internal heating mechanism of mammals, reptiles are cold-blooded. This means their body temperature is never more than a few degrees above the temperature of their surroundings. Common reptiles include lizards, snakes, turtles, tortoises, and crocodiles.

*Note:* It is very important to research species-specific needs before attempting to care for reptiles. Before any reptile is brought into the classroom, its daily care and maintenance during the school year as well as over holidays and the summer months must be considered and a plan of action written. The ultimate disposal of the animal should be carefully considered before it is brought into the classroom and dealt with in a responsible manner. Keep in mind that lizards have a life expectancy up to 30 years, snakes 15–30 years, and turtles 40–60 years.

### Housing

Housing basics for reptiles include land, hiding places, warmth, and water. Large aquariums (30 gallons or more) or sizable wooden boxes work best. It is important that the aquarium have a sturdy, well-ventilated lid, since many species can climb or jump. Typically, the larger the cage the more active the reptiles will be. However, regardless of size, only one reptile should be in each container or cage. Reptiles tend to be very territorial and overcrowding often leads to aggressive behavior and injuries.

Terrain consisting of sand, bark pieces, smooth rocks, and branches to climb on make a good environment for most reptiles. Turtles require a moist environment. Some turtles are aquatic and need to swim, whereas land and semiaquatic species require only moist soil.

A dish of shallow, non-chlorinated water large enough for the reptile to submerge itself (without drowning) is also needed. Do not use distilled or deionized water. Fresh aged water, such as clean pond water or spring water, is a source of chlorine-free water. Tap water may be dechlorinated by exposing it to sunlight in an open container for a few days. In dry climates, misting the inside of the terrarium occasionally with a clean spray bottle filled with dechlorinated water is suggested.

It is best to have a “cave” or other hiding area, which gives the reptile a feeling of security. Artificial heat is not needed for all reptiles. Keeping the aquarium at warm room temperature (72–80 °F) and out of direct sunlight should keep the environment suitable. Some desert species need warmer temperatures (80–85 °F), and artificial heating may be necessary. Electric heated rocks can get too hot and burn the reptiles. It is better to have a heating pad underneath the terrarium or a warming light on the top of the cage. Overheating can be detrimental to the health of reptiles. Keep a thermometer inside the cage to monitor the temperature. Many reptiles molt their skins. It is very important that they have access to a shallow pan or dish with water and rough surfaces (logs, rocks) to ease the process of losing their skin. Many reptiles will refuse food while molting, but will be hungry after their skin is shed. Do not handle reptiles while they are molting.

### Feeding

Chameleons will not drink water from a dish and require a “drip” setup. This is because they do not associate standing water with drinking. A small paper cup with a pinhole in the bottom or an ice cube suspended above the foliage allows water droplets to run downward, mimicking the way chameleons acquire water in the wild. Remove fecal matter and change the water from the terrarium as needed—at least weekly.

Although some species require specific diets, generally reptiles eat live insects such as fruit flies, crickets, mealworms, earthworms, and spiders. Some species of turtles are vegetarians and will feed on lettuce, melon, and berries. Most reptiles need to be fed about three times per week. Snakes should be fed no more than once per week and usually require store bought mice, rats, or gerbils that have been killed immediately prior to feeding. Do not handle the snake for a few days following feeding, since food has a tendency to dislodge.

### In Case of Illness

Any sick, inactive reptiles should be isolated to avoid infecting others. Keep the sick reptile alone in a tank that is kept at

approximately 85 °F at all times. If a heat lamp is being used as a heat source, provide a shaded area. If the problem persists, a specialized veterinarian, pet store, or herpetological society should be consulted for help.

### Tips

- Frequent handling of reptiles is not recommended. Their skin is permeable and the salt and oil from human skin can be very irritating. Reptiles, especially turtles, may also carry *Salmonella* bacteria. Always wash hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds with soap and water after handling. Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling reptiles.
- Never pick a reptile (or other animal) up by its tail or legs. Support the animal firmly (without squeezing) in the palm of your hand, with your fingers wrapped securely around its body.
- It is difficult to tell if a snake is sleeping. Attempting to handle the snake while it is sleeping will alarm the snake. Make the snake aware of your presence before attempting to pick it up.
- Have a damp rag available while handling reptiles. If an animal gets free, drop the rag over it to make recapturing easier.
- Do not intermix species of reptiles. Reptiles are very territorial and competitive in nature and may injure each other.

### Disposal

Please consult your current *Flinn Scientific Catalog/Reference Manual* for general guidelines and specific procedures governing the disposal of laboratory waste. Deceased reptiles may be disposed of according to Flinn Suggested Biological Waste Disposal Method Type IV. Never release animals into the local ecosystem. Many are invasive and even if they are native, the introduced animal may harbor pathogens that could decimate the local population.

### Materials for *Care of Reptiles* are available from Flinn Scientific, Inc.

Catalog No.	Description
LM1169	Chameleon, 3
FB0513	Plastic Animal Cage
FB0213	Aquarium, 29-gal.
FB0403	Aquarium Screen Cover
FB0698	Reptile Cage Litter
FB1352	Compressed Reptile Bedding
FB0699	Reptile Heating Pad
FB0688	Terrarium Light, Fluorescent
AP5406	Metal-Backed Thermometer
LM1112	Mealworms, 30
LM1164	Crickets, 50
LM1103	Earthworms, 30

Consult your *Flinn Scientific Catalog/Reference Manual* for current prices.