

Your herbivore and you

Did you just acquire an herbivore like a rabbit or a tortoise? Are you researching the care of an omnivore like a bearded dragon? One of the most important parts of animal husbandry is feeding a proper diet, and for truly good health you need to offer them fresh veggies. Fresh veggies offer something that prepared and pelleted diets do not – a lot of variety and proper levels of moisture (some desert reptiles don't drink a great deal and get most of their moisture from the vegetables they eat).



This means planning your pet's meals, going to the grocery store, and chopping up the veggies. And while it might sound like a lot of work, it's not! It's truly a great deal of fun feeding your pets a healthy diet with fresh foods – and it's a great opportunity to improve your diet, as well.

But what should you feed? Can you feed too much of anything? What can't you feed?

The biggest thing to keep in mind is that there is no food that contains complete nutrition, so offer a wide variety of different types of veggies. This will help insure that the nutritional deficiencies in one food are covered by another.

Foods you can feed:

Dark leafy greens should be around 75% of the diet. This includes vegetables like Romaine, red, and green lettuces, collard, mustard, and turnip greens, and dandelion greens. Kale, rocket, arugula, spring greens, and watercress can occasionally be mixed in with the other greens.



Other veggies to offer include finely chopped green beans, snap peas, and occasionally grated sweet potato or carrot. Occasionally offer the fine tops of broccoli to reptiles like young bearded dragons and iguanas and the harder, thicker stems can be given to guinea pigs and rabbits. Cucumbers and tomatoes can also be offered once or twice a week. Squash or pumpkin, whether finely grated raw or canned like [Nature's Logic](#), makes a nice variation in their food, as do bell peppers.

Fruits can be given a couple of times a week as treats; small orange and apple slices make dinner time special for guinea pigs and rabbits. Fresh fruits can make great training treats, too, and something like a slice of strawberry can make a healthy reward for a good guinea pig. Fruit should make up no more than 10% of your pet's diet.

Some herbs make a nice addition to your pet's diet. Contrary to the old wive's tale, cilantro does not contribute to bacterial infections, and, since it is high in vitamin C, can be give a couple of times a week. Fresh basil, sage, oregano, and thyme can add some spice to their dinner, too. Offering small amounts is important as some of the essential oils in the herbs can be a bit strong for some animals.



Squash blossoms, an underutilized vegetable. Eating them is a great way to control your squash crop.

A lot of animals love flowers. Our neighbors at [Mid Central Printing](#) used to bring us flowers from their hibiscus bush, and a great customer and his daughter brings us extra squash blossoms from his garden for Michelle and the other animals (he has *tons*, squash is constantly producing fruit). Make sure they are free of pesticides and wash them well to remove any dirt. Nasturtiums, dandelions, marigolds, and roses are all edible and make a fun addition to their dinner.

Frozen vegetables are a great convenience, and can provide a great back up for when you run out of greens and can't get to the store or to add some quick variety to a boring diet. However, frozen veggies should not comprise a regular part of your pet's diet. Freezing destroys thiamin (vitamin B1), an essential nutrient.

This list is not exhaustive. Most things that are safe for us to eat are fine, in moderation and with variety, for our pets to eat. A lot of animals have their favorite foods, too, liking one veggie over another. Experiment, see what they like. Keep offering them a variety, though, as you don't want them to get addicted to one or two particular types of food and become picky eaters.

Be sure to only give the freshest veggies and fruits, and make sure to thoroughly wash everything. Remove them if they're uneaten and start to get soggy to help prevent bacterial infections and upset stomachs.

What not to feed

A compound called oxalates can be too high in certain veggies. A diet too heavy in these vegetable can, over time, prevent the absorption of calcium and can lead to kidney problems. Spinach, beet greens, okra, parsley, and leeks are high in oxalates and should rarely be offered, if at all. Carrots are another common vegetable that is fed too much. Besides being high in oxalates, it contains a lot of sugar and should be offered as a rare treat – usually no more than one baby carrot a week. Many berries can contain a lot of oxalates (and are high in sugars) and should, again, be offered only as a rare treat.



Bugs Bunny set such a bad example.

When fed in excess, vegetables including broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, cabbage, cauliflower, and bok choy can cause problems with thyroid function due to a compound called goitrogens. This can bind to iodine, slowing down metabolism, leading to weight gain, and stunted growth. This is less of a problem if they are rare additions to a healthy, varied diet.



Iceberg lettuce is devoid of nutrients. It's mostly

Avoid feeding iceberg lettuce. It has zero nutritional value, being mostly water; it's even recommended that we stick with more nutritious types of lettuce. Avoid giving avocado, nuts, and seeds, as they are too high in fat. Also do not feed onions, as it can make them very ill.

Have fun with your pet's diet, and see what they like. Healthy eating is far from boring. Offering them some of the salad you and your kids are having for dinner not only keeps them healthy and happy, it'll focus your diet on a variety of nutritious foods, too.