

Understanding reptiles:

Housing and equipment:

The most important and basic decision, once you have decided on the right reptile for your lifestyle, is the cage they are going to live in, and what we need to make sure they thrive in our care.

Cages: The terrarium is the most important piece of equipment for your reptile. This is where they are going to be spending almost all of their time in there, it will help maintain the proper temperature and humidity, and show off your pet!

We're always asked "what is the best cage to get?" Our standard answer is: "Always go for the largest cage that fits your budget and your home." Both are important considerations, and keep in mind the time the pet will be spending in there, and their final, adult size. For some animals, such as a bearded dragon, it's best to get their adult sized cage in the beginning; you'll be buying it soon enough, and it'll save you money in the long run.



There are a lot of choices and sizes in terrariums, so you have to know your pet's needs to provide the best home for them. Some reptiles, like bearded dragons, need a larger footprint, so you'd go for a short terrarium that is wide. Some arboreal reptiles, such as chameleons, need to be able to climb, so you'd go for one of the tall cages.

Instead of using a terrarium, many house their pets in a Critter Cage by R-Zilla. They are made like an aquarium, but, since they don't hold water, the glass is thinner and lighter. They have the added benefit of a secure screen top with safety latches. These cages are best for more terrestrial animals like a bearded dragon, as they are wide than they are tall.



For aquatic turtles, it's important to note that you cannot use regular terrariums or critter cages. The weight of the water can damage the seals or crack the glass, leading to a leak. It's best to use either a regular aquarium or a special turtle tank - with their half wall it makes it easy to add a hang on the back filter to keep the water cleaner.

Speaking of aquatic turtles, one of our favorite accessories for them is the [Zoo Med Turtle Dock](#). This clever basking spot attaches with suction cups to the wall, but the self-leveling platform can move up and down with the water level. It's a great way to let your turtle get out of the water, dry out and warm up.



Decorations: This is the fun part of owning a reptile! Decorations not only make your reptile's cage look really cool, they can actually provide some benefits to your pet. It gives them a cover to hide under, providing emotional comfort. Many arboreal reptiles need to be able to hide among branches and leaves; they can become very stressed if they have to sit out in the open. For basking reptiles, a tall branch or secure stone allows them to get closer to the source of heat.

Plants: You can use real and/or plastic plants to decorate your terrarium. Real plants give an authentic look, but can require more maintenance when cleaning the cage. We like to keep real plants in pots, as it makes it easier to take them out for cage changes. A small potted palm or ficus can really make a tropical reptile's terrarium pop! Make sure any plant that could be eaten is non-toxic for your reptile.

If you want an easier route, try artificial standing plants. With a weighted base, they're easy to use in terrariums and look great - there's even cacti and succulents for desert reptiles. They're also easy to clean and disinfect.



With a wide range of species and sizes, plastic hanging plants make great hiding places for arboreal species; they can be suction cupped to the wall of the tank, or, for a realistic look, be twined around branches. These look best in tropical cages and are much easier to clean and sanitize.



Branches: Either real or artificial branches can be used in your cage. Use wood specially prepared for reptile cages, such as grape vine and Mopani wood, as pieces from outside can be contaminated with pesticides, parasites, and pollution. Artificial vines, like [Exo Terra's Jungle Vine](#) can be twisted to mimic a real jungle vines (and they're waterproof, so they can be used in fish tanks and amphibian habitats, too.)

Huts, caves, and hides: Many reptiles and amphibians like to hide, as it gives them a sense of security. Make it look as real as possible with ones made of wood or that mimic stone, like [Exo Terra's Gecko Cave](#) or go for a really cool look with their [primate skull](#), crocodile, or buffalo skull.



Make sure your decorations are safe! Look for loose strings or wires, as these can catch and injure toes. Be sure all branches and rocks are stable, to prevent falls or crushing risks. Tip: Use aquarium safe silicone to glue rocks together in a stable pile to make a platform. Check the security of your decorations on a daily basis, especially if your reptile is more active.

Water features: Water features do more than just provide your reptile with water for drinking or soaking; they also increase your ambient humidity and can really complete your cage's look.



Waterfall: Because of its unique design, it can be installed anywhere in the terrarium and provides both clean drinking water and another way to increase humidity. Water circulation is provided by the included pump in the base. The waterfall consists of several parts to facilitate cleaning, and is easy to sanitize.

Drippers: Arboreal reptiles generally do not recognize motionless sources of water; instead they drink from moving dewdrops and raindrops while foraging in the forest canopy. We have a couple of ways to provide this much needed moisture. The Zoo Med Drippers simulate natural rainfall and provide humidity for captive reptiles. Use a pan in the bottom of the cage to catch the water (we like to use a cat litter box). Simply fill the Dripper, set it on top of your cage, and set the valve to control the rate that water drips down plants. Empty the pan and refill the dripper as needed.



This cool new product by Exo Terra looks like a natural plant, but is actually a cleverly disguised watering system. The water is pumped up from a dish and drips down the leaves, providing much needed water to animals such as chameleons.

Cool time (and money) saving tools:

Repti-fogger: This is one of our favorite ways to help add humidity to your tropical reptile. The large reservoir gives you several days of use before refilling. It uses an ultrasonic transducer to create a fine fog that then blows into your terrarium through the included tube. Plug this unit into the Zoo Med's HygroTherm™ Humidity and Temperature Controller for precise humidity and temperature control, or a timer to automatically run the fogger. Be sure to use distilled water, and check to make sure that moisture is not building up on the bottom of the cage.



Lamp stands: One of our favorite money savers. As we mentioned before, when bulbs are hot, their filament is very fragile and breaks easily when you move it. By hanging your lamps from a stand, they don't get bumped around, saving you a lot in replacement bulbs. Lamp stands also give you a little more control over your temperatures, as their adjustable arms allow you to move your bulbs closer to or further away from your reptile as needed.

Not exactly a tool, but we believe our Bug Club cards are a valuable addition to your reptile's care program. They save you a lot of time, since you don't have to stand in line at the register when getting your bugs. They also save you money, as each card is cheaper than buying insects each time. Simply buy a card (a 300 insect card for \$25, 500 insect card for \$40, or 1000 bug card for \$70) and we scratch off how many insects you get each time. A lot of parents love the club, as their kids can come get food for their reptile and they don't need to carry money. The card can be used for crickets, waxworms, mealworms, super worms, and Calci worms.

Designing the cage is often considered one of the most enjoyable parts of keeping reptiles and amphibians. With the proper cage, accessories, and knowledge, you'll have healthy and happy pets that thrive in your home.