

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Reptiles

Which reptile is right for you?



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

Every reptile on the shelf looks like a good idea in the store. The little gecko is calm, the baby tortoise fits in a palm, the snake is a pretty orange ribbon, and the chameleon looks like a living jewel. What the shelf does not show you is what each of those animals needs on day 400 and day 4,000: the right heat, the right light, a steady supply of bugs or thawed mice, an enclosure that is bigger than anyone planned for, and, for several species, a lifespan that outlasts a mortgage. Choosing the right reptile is mostly a matter of matching an honest animal to an honest family, and that is exactly what this guide is for.

We will be straight with you throughout. **Leopard geckos, crested geckos, corn snakes and bearded dragons are the usual starter reptiles** for good reasons: they are hardy, widely captive-bred, and forgiving of the ordinary mistakes new keepers make. **Green iguanas, veiled chameleons and Chinese water dragons are not beginner animals**, and we will say so plainly rather than let a cute baby in a tiny tank talk you into trouble. Tortoises, box turtles and aquatic turtles look easy and are anything but, mostly because of how long they live and how large their needs become.

Each species below has its own full Walnut Creek Supply care guide with every number, schedule and shopping list. Think of this page as the front door: read it, narrow your list to one or two animals, then follow the links for the deep dive. We keep animals and grow our own food here in Lancaster County, and we would rather talk you out of the wrong pet today than hear from you about it in a year.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Choosing Your First Reptile

Before you fall for any particular animal, walk through this list with everyone in your household. Answer every item honestly; a "we will figure it out" on any of them is a warning sign.

1. **Count the years.** Reptiles live long. Leopard geckos, crested geckos, corn snakes and blue tongue skinks commonly reach 15 to 20 years, ball pythons 20 to 30, and tortoises and box turtles can outlive their owners. Ask who will care for the animal when your child leaves for college or when your life changes.
2. **Measure the space.** Find the exact spot where the enclosure will live, then check it against the minimum size in the table later in this guide. Remember that tortoises, iguanas, large turtles and some snakes need far more room as adults than they do as babies.
3. **Add up the real budget.** Setup (enclosure, lighting, thermostat, décor) comes first. After that come monthly costs: feeder insects or thawed rodents, fresh produce, supplements, replacement UVB bulbs, electricity, and a vet who sees reptiles. Plan for all of it before you buy the animal.
4. **Decide who does the daily care.** Be honest. If it is a child's pet, an adult still owns the schedule, the heat and the hygiene. Reptiles cannot tell you when something is wrong.
5. **Decide how you feel about feeding.** Insect eaters mean a live bug colony or weekly deliveries. Snakes mean frozen-thawed rodents in your freezer. Herbivores mean a lot of fresh greens, washed and chopped. There is no reptile that eats from a scoop alone, with the partial exception of the crested gecko.
6. **Think about allergies and other pets.** Reptiles are dander-free, which helps many allergic households, but feeder insects and rodents can trigger their own reactions. Dogs, cats and ferrets can stress, injure or contaminate a reptile enclosure.
7. **Consider the youngest and oldest people at home.** Everyone in the house needs to follow Salmonella hygiene, and very young children, pregnant women, older adults and anyone with a weakened immune system face higher risk from reptile bacteria. Ask your doctor if you are unsure.
8. **Check your local laws and your lease.** State wildlife rules, city ordinances, homeowner association rules and rental agreements can all restrict reptiles. See the Legal & Ethical Sourcing section below, and check your state wildlife agency and

local rules yourself.

9. **Find a reptile vet before you buy.** Many dog-and-cat clinics do not see reptiles. Call ahead and ask who treats lizards, snakes or turtles within a reasonable drive, and whether they take new patients.
10. **Plan for time away.** Heat lamps, thermostats and feeding schedules do not pause when you travel. Who covers a weekend away? A week?

First-Time Starter Bundle

Whatever species you choose, these are the categories every new reptile keeper needs on hand before the animal comes home. Species guides give the exact sizes and settings.

Essentials

- **A properly sized, secure enclosure** with a locking lid or doors and good ventilation, sized to the adult animal's minimum rather than the baby's. Front-opening doors are far less stressful for most species than reaching in from above. Chameleons need a screen-sided enclosure instead of glass.
- **A primary heat source** (basking lamp, radiant heat panel, deep heat projector or ceramic heat emitter, depending on the species) matched to the animal's needs. Never use a heat rock; they cause burns.
- **A thermostat for every heat source.** This is the single most important safety item in reptile keeping. A thermostat controls the heater so it cannot run away, and it is the difference between a stable home and a fire or a burned animal.
- **UVB lighting designed for reptiles** for any species that needs it (most lizards, tortoises and turtles, and a good idea for many others), with a fixture sized to the enclosure and a reminder on your calendar to replace the tube on schedule.
- **At least two digital probe thermometers and a digital hygrometer**, plus an infrared temperature gun for checking surfaces. Stick-on dial gauges are not accurate enough.
- **Appropriate substrate** for the species. Dry-desert species, humid-forest species and burrowers all want different things, and the wrong choice causes impaction, respiratory trouble or shedding problems.
- **Hides, shelter and cover** so the animal can retreat and feel secure, with at least one on the warm side and one on the cool side for terrestrial species.
- **Food and water dishes** that suit the animal, plus supplements (plain calcium, calcium with vitamin D3 and a reptile multivitamin) for insect-eating and herbivorous lizards.
- **The right food, in hand before arrival:** feeder insects, frozen-thawed rodents, fresh greens or a complete prepared diet.
- **Cleaning supplies kept strictly separate from the kitchen:** a dedicated tub and sponge for the enclosure, reptile-safe disinfectant, and plenty of hand soap.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: [Reptile and Amphibian Enclosures](#) and [Reptile and Amphibian Terrarium Supplies & Accessories](#).

Enrichment

- **Climbing branches, rocks and platforms** for species that climb, and varied terrain for species that explore.
- **Live or artificial plants** that add cover, hold humidity for tropical species, and give shy animals visual security.
- **A background or covered sides** on the enclosure to reduce the stress that comes from seeing reflections and room activity.
- **Digging or burrowing space** where it suits the species, such as a deep substrate area for burrowers.
- **A shallow soaking dish or bathing area** for species that enjoy a soak and for those that need help with shedding.

- **Feeding variety** such as new safe greens, a different feeder insect or a scatter-fed meal, which turns eating into hunting and foraging.
- **A secure travel carrier** for vet visits, kept in a closet and ready to go.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Reptile and Amphibian Accessories.

SECTION 2

Meet the Reptiles

Here are the thirteen reptiles our families ask about most, grouped loosely from the easiest starters to the specialists. Each name links to its own full care guide.

The usual starter reptiles

Leopard Gecko. A ground-dwelling gecko from the rocky, arid hills of South Asia, 7 to 10 inches long, active at dusk and after dark. Calm, unhurried and easy to hold with patience, it is the textbook first lizard. It lives 15 to 20 years and needs a floor footprint of at least 36 by 18 inches (the size of a 40-gallon breeder), a warm side around 88 to 92 degrees Fahrenheit at the surface, dry air, and a steady diet of feeder insects. Honest caveat: you will be buying bugs for roughly two decades.

Crested Gecko. A tree-dwelling gecko from New Caledonia, 6 to 10 inches long, nocturnal and jumpy at first, then handleable. It lives 15 to 20 years and needs a tall enclosure of at least 18 by 18 by 24 inches, humidity in the 60 to 80 percent range, and room temperatures that never sit below 65 degrees. Its main food is a prepared powdered diet mixed with water, which makes it the least bug-dependent starter on this list. It is delicate to grab and can drop its tail, so it is better for watching than for lots of handling.

Bearded Dragon. An Australian lizard that reaches 16 to 24 inches, active by day, famously calm and curious. Dragons are the lizard most likely to sit on your shoulder and watch television. They live roughly 10 to 15 years, need an adult enclosure around 4 by 2 by 2 feet, a hot basking spot of 100 to 110 degrees for adults, strong UVB, and a diet that shifts from mostly insects when young to mostly greens as adults. They are a bigger commitment of space and light than a gecko, and the setup cost is higher.

Corn Snake. A slender, active constrictor from the American Southeast, usually 3.5 to 5 feet long and 15 to 20 years in captivity. Corn snakes are the best-known starter snake: hardy, tolerant of handling, and available in dozens of colors. They need an enclosure about 4 by 2 by 2 feet, a warm side around 85 to 90 degrees at the surface, and frozen-thawed mice every week or two as adults. They are famous escape artists, so a tight lid is non-negotiable.

Step-up lizards

Blue Tongue Skink. A stocky, calm Australian and Indonesian lizard 18 to 24 inches long that lives 15 to 20 or more years. Blue tongues are curious and often very tame, and they eat an omnivore's mix of protein, greens and a little fruit. They want a floor enclosure around 4 by 2 feet, a hot basking spot of 100 to 110 degrees, and strong UVB. A fine second reptile or a first for a prepared keeper, but not the cheapest or smallest choice.

Uromastix. A heat-loving, herbivorous desert lizard that puffs up and blocks its burrow when worried. Size depends on the species, from about 8 to 12 inches for the smallest to 12 to 16 inches for the mid-size forms and 30 or more inches for the Egyptian. It lives 15 to 25 years, needs a basking rock surface of 120 to 135 degrees, very dry air, powerful UVB, and a diet of greens, flowers and seeds. Rewarding and unusual, but the heat and the diet are specialist territory.

Veiled Chameleon. A showy, color-changing lizard from Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Males reach 18 to 24 inches and live about 5 to 8 years; females stay near 10 to 14 inches and live about 3 to 5 years. Chameleons are display animals, not handling animals. They need a tall screen enclosure of at least 24 by 24 by 48 inches, a mist-and-drip watering routine because many will not drink from a bowl, specific UVB and temperatures, and calm surroundings. They stress and fail easily. This is not a beginner animal.

Chinese Water Dragon. A bright green, semi-aquatic Asian lizard that grows to 24 to 36 inches, most of it tail, and lives 10 to 15 years. It needs a tall enclosure of at least 48 by 24 by 48 inches, humidity of 70 to 80 percent, a swimming and soaking feature, UVB, and a bug-and-greens diet. Young animals are flighty and may injure themselves bolting. This is not a beginner animal.

Green Iguana. The classic "baby lizard that becomes a giant." A hatchling is 6 to 8 inches; an adult is 4 to 6 feet and 10 to 20 pounds, with a custom-built enclosure of at least 6 by 3 by 6 feet, strong UVB, high humidity and a strictly plant-based diet. It lives 10 to 20 years and can become territorial and strong as it matures. This is not a beginner animal, and it is the species most

often rehomed.

Snakes, tortoises and turtles

Ball Python. A calm, heavy-bodied constrictor from West and Central Africa. Females reach 4 to 6 feet, males 3 to 4 feet, and a captive ball python commonly lives 20 to 30 years. Ball pythons need warm room temperatures, humidity of 60 to 80 percent, a 4 by 2 by 2 foot enclosure for an adult, and frozen-thawed rodents. They are gentle and easy to hold, but some individuals go on hunger strikes that worry new keepers, and their lifespan is a serious commitment.

Tortoise. Tortoises are land-dwelling, plant-eating, and extremely long lived: 40 to 80 years or more is normal. Small species such as the Russian, Hermann's and Greek tortoise are 5 to 12 inches and are happiest in an open table of 8 by 4 feet or larger. Sulcata tortoises reach 80 to 150 pounds and are not apartment pets. All need strong UVB, a heat gradient and a grazing-style diet. They are low-drama pets that demand a lifetime plan.

Aquatic Turtle. Red-eared sliders, painted turtles, map, musk and mud turtles share an "easy pet" reputation they do not deserve. A tiny slider becomes a shell 8 to 12 inches long that needs a 75 to 125 gallon tank or more and heavy filtration, and the turtle lives 20 to 30 or more years. They are messy, strong swimmers and prone to carrying Salmonella. Smaller musk and mud turtles can live in tanks around 30 to 50 gallons. Plan for the adult, not the baby.

Box Turtle. A hinged-shell land turtle, about 5 to 7 inches when grown, shy and stress-prone, and often living 40 to 50 years or more. Box turtles are best as watched, not handled, animals, and they need humid, naturalistic enclosures with a minimum floor space around 4 by 2 feet (8 by 4 is ideal). They are also tied up in strict law: in Pennsylvania the woodland box turtle cannot legally be kept at all. See the Legal & Ethical Sourcing section.

SECTION 3

Which Reptile Is Right for You?

Start with the big comparison. Figures are typical ranges for healthy, well-kept animals and they vary by individual and by species within a group (for example, tortoises and aquatic turtles each cover several species). The full guide for each animal has the details.

Species	Adult size	Typical lifespan	Minimum adult enclosure	Handling	Beginner rating	Best for
Leopard Gecko	7 to 10 inches	15 to 20 years	36 x 18 inches floor (40-gallon breeder size)	Tolerates calm, gentle handling	Excellent starter	First reptile, small spaces, gentle handling
Crested Gecko	6 to 10 inches	15 to 20 years	18 x 18 x 24 inches tall	Handleable with patience; jumpy	Excellent starter	Busy keepers, minimal bug handling, display
Bearded Dragon	16 to 24 inches	10 to 15 years	4 x 2 x 2 feet (about 120 gallons)	Calm and interactive	Good starter	Families who want an interactive lizard
Blue Tongue Skink	18 to 24 inches	15 to 20+ years	4 x 2 feet floor, 1.5 to 2 feet tall	Calm, often very tame	Intermediate	Keepers ready for a bigger lizard with personality
Veiled Chameleon	Males 18 to 24 inches; females 10 to 14 inches	Males 5 to 8 years; females 3 to 5 years	24 x 24 x 48 inches tall, screen	Watch, do not handle	Not for beginners	Experienced keepers who want a display animal
Chinese Water Dragon	24 to 36 inches	10 to 15 years	48 x 24 x 48 inches tall	Flighty when young; calmer with time	Not for beginners	Experienced keepers with space and humidity control
Green Iguana	4 to 6 feet	10 to 20 years	6 x 3 x 6 feet, custom build	Variable; can be territorial	Not for beginners	Experienced keepers with a dedicated room
Uromastix	8 to 16 inches (Egyptian 30+)	15 to 25 years	4 x 2 x 2 feet for mid-size species	Calm once settled	Intermediate	Keepers who enjoy specialist desert setups
Corn Snake	3.5 to 5 feet	15 to 20 years	4 x 2 x 2 feet	Tolerant, active, curious	Excellent starter	First snake, kids with supervision, handling
Ball Python	3 to 6 feet	20 to 30 years	4 x 2 x 2 feet	Docile, curls into a ball	Good starter	Calm handling and a very long commitment

Species	Adult size	Typical lifespan	Minimum adult enclosure	Handling	Beginner rating	Best for
Tortoise	5 to 12+ inches for small species; sulcata 80 to 150+ pounds	40 to 80+ years	8 x 4 feet table for small species	Handle sparingly	Intermediate	Lifelong planners with indoor and outdoor space
Aquatic Turtle	3 to 12 inches, depending on species	20 to 30+ years	30 to 125+ gallons by species	Look, do not hold	Intermediate	Water-tank lovers who accept filtration and mess
Box Turtle	5 to 7 inches	40 to 50+ years	About 4 x 2 feet floor (8 x 4 ideal)	Shy; observe	Intermediate	Naturalistic setups; check your state law

Choose this if...

You want a first reptile for a child (with a parent in charge). A leopard gecko or a corn snake. Both tolerate gentle handling, are hardy, and have enough captive-bred history that problems are well understood. A parent must own the heat, the feeding and the hygiene, because children cannot reliably do any of that alone. A bearded dragon is a good choice for an older child who will enjoy a more interactive animal and a bigger setup.

You are busy and want low daily fuss. A leopard gecko is the classic answer: nocturnal, content with a small footprint, and fed a few times a week. A crested gecko is even less bug-dependent because its main food is a prepared powder. A corn snake eats only every week or two once grown, which makes it very easy to fit around work.

You want to hold and interact with your reptile. A bearded dragon is the most interactive common lizard, a blue tongue skink is calm and often very tame, and a corn snake or ball python will happily ride on your arms. Chameleons, aquatic turtles and box turtles do not enjoy being held and are better watched.

You want a beautiful display pet to watch. A crested gecko in a planted tall enclosure, a veiled chameleon (for experienced keepers only), or a naturalistic box turtle habitat (where legal) are all lovely to look at. Remember that display animals tend to be the least tolerant of handling.

You have a small apartment. Leopard gecko, crested gecko or a small corn snake. All three fit in a reasonable footprint without a custom build. Skip the tortoise, the iguana and the big aquatic turtle.

You want a very long commitment. Ball pythons (often 20 to 30 years), tortoises (40 to 80 years or more) and box turtles (40 to 50 years or more) all outlive many marriages and many careers. If you cannot name a backup keeper, choose a shorter-lived animal.

You are already comfortable with reptiles and want a challenge. The blue tongue skink and the uromastix are rewarding step-ups. Chinese water dragons, veiled chameleons and green iguanas are for keepers with proven experience, a reptile vet nearby, and the space and budget to do it right.

Poor first choices, said kindly. The green iguana, the veiled chameleon and the Chinese water dragon are not beginner animals. The iguana outgrows nearly every home. The chameleon is stress-sensitive and dies of small mistakes. The water dragon needs a big, humid, tall setup and tends to hurt itself when frightened. A large tortoise (sulcata) and a red-eared slider are also frequent regrets because of their final size. We stock supplies for all of them because experienced keepers do exist, but we will always steer

a first-time keeper elsewhere.

SECTION 4

Space, Setup & Budget

Space is where reptile plans most often fall apart. Baby animals look like they belong in a plastic tub, and a tub is where most of them are sold. The honest question is: where will the adult live, and will that room still exist in ten years?

Enclosure rules that apply to every reptile

- **Floor space matters more than height** for ground-dwellers (geckos, dragons, skinks, snakes, tortoises, uromastyx). Tall enclosures are right for climbing species such as crested geckos, chameleons and water dragons.
- **Buy the adult size once.** Upgrading in small steps costs more than going straight to the right enclosure. Very small animals can use a smaller start with extra cover, but plan the adult enclosure before you bring the baby home.
- **Escape-proof it.** Snakes and lizards find any gap. Lids and doors must close tightly. Corn snakes are famous for it.
- **Front-opening doors reduce stress.** A hand coming from above looks like a hawk to most reptiles.
- **Never use glass for a chameleon.** Chameleons need screen sides and strong airflow.
- **Keep it out of drafts, direct sun and kitchen areas.** A sunny window can cook an enclosure in minutes.

Budget in three layers

1. **Setup cost.** Enclosure, lighting, thermostat, heat source, substrate, hides, décor and instruments. Setup costs vary hugely: a leopard gecko or corn snake is much cheaper than a bearded dragon, and any large lizard, tortoise or turtle setup costs far more again. Anything custom-built costs more still.
2. **Monthly cost.** Food (feeder insects, frozen-thawed rodents, or fresh produce), supplements, substrate refills, and electricity for heat and light. Larger and herbivorous animals use more of everything.
3. **Yearly and surprise cost.** Replacement UVB tubes (roughly twice a year for many species), annual vet visits with fecal tests, and emergency care. Reptile vets are specialists and cost more than a regular clinic. Set aside a small emergency fund before you buy.

Prices vary by region, supplier and season, so we do not quote exact figures here. A reasonable rule of thumb is to treat the animal itself as the cheapest part of the bill.

Where each reptile lives

- **Small lizards** (leopard gecko, crested gecko) live in a single medium enclosure that fits on a dresser or stand.
- **Medium lizards** (bearded dragon, blue tongue skink, uromastyx) need a large floor-level enclosure, typically around 4 by 2 feet.
- **Tall tree lizards** (chameleon, water dragon) need tall enclosures in a quiet room.
- **The iguana** needs a custom room-sized build.
- **Snakes** (corn snake, ball python) need a 4 by 2 by 2 foot enclosure that closes tight.
- **Tortoises** do best in an open-top table around 8 by 4 feet or larger, plus a safe outdoor pen in warm months.
- **Aquatic turtles** need a big aquarium or stock tank, a basking dock and heavy filtration.
- **Box turtles** need a large, humid, naturalistic floor enclosure, or a secure outdoor pen where legal.

SECTION 5

Heat, Light & Habitat Basics

Reptiles are **ectotherms**, which means they cannot make their own body heat the way a dog or a person does. They borrow it from their environment, moving between warm and cool spots to regulate themselves. Get heat and light wrong and nothing else will work: food will not digest, immune systems fail, bones soften, and animals go off their feed. The good news is that the same three ideas apply to nearly every species.

Heat gradients

A **heat gradient** is a range of temperatures across the enclosure. The warm end holds a hot basking spot; the opposite end is cooler. The animal moves back and forth to find the temperature it needs at that moment. A uniform temperature does not work, and an enclosure that is warm all over is as bad as one that is cool all over.

Measure two things: the **surface temperature** of the basking spot (with an infrared temperature gun) and the **air temperature** at animal level on the warm and cool ends (with probe thermometers). Aim for the numbers in the species guide.

Species	Warm-side or basking surface target	Cool-end air target
Leopard Gecko	88 to 92°F surface	70 to 75°F
Crested Gecko	Room temperature, never below 65°F	Room temperature, never below 65°F
Bearded Dragon	100 to 110°F for adults (105 to 115°F for juveniles)	Cooler end of the enclosure; see species guide
Blue Tongue Skink	100 to 110°F	75 to 80°F
Veiled Chameleon	85 to 95°F	68 to 72°F
Chinese Water Dragon	90 to 95°F	75 to 80°F
Green Iguana	95 to 105°F	75 to 80°F
Uromastix	120 to 135°F on the basking rock	80 to 85°F
Corn Snake	85 to 90°F surface	72 to 78°F
Ball Python	88 to 92°F surface	76 to 80°F
Tortoise	95 to 100°F for most small species (sulcata 95 to 105°F; red-footed 90 to 95°F)	70 to 75°F
Aquatic Turtle	90 to 95°F basking surface	Water temperature per species guide
Box Turtle	85 to 90°F	Cooler and humid retreat; see species guide

The temperatures above are the targets in our individual care guides. Individual animals and subspecies vary, so treat them as starting points and follow the species guide.

Thermostats: not optional

Every heat source needs a **thermostat**, a device that senses the temperature and switches the heater on and off (or dims it) to hold your target. Without one, a lamp or heat panel runs at full power until something goes wrong: the animal burns, the enclosure overheats, or the equipment fails and starts a fire. Match the thermostat type to the heater (on/off, dimming, or pulse-proportional), put the probe where the animal actually sits, and check the reading yourself with a separate thermometer.

Never use heat rocks, which cause burns because the animal presses against them.

UVB: the sunshine vitamin

UVB is the ultraviolet light that lets many reptiles make **vitamin D3**, which they need to absorb calcium. Without it, bones soften and deform in a painful, common and preventable condition called **metabolic bone disease**. For most diurnal (daytime) lizards, tortoises and turtles, UVB is essential, not optional.

What to know:

- **Use a lamp made for reptiles**, usually a linear T5 HO tube for larger enclosures, sized and mounted to the species guide. A regular household bulb or window light does not do the job; glass blocks UVB.
- **UV strength is measured on the Ferguson zone scale**, which ranks species by how much UV they naturally experience (zone 1 is low, zone 4 is desert-sun). Match the tube and distance to your animal's zone.
- **Replace tubes on schedule**, usually every 6 to 12 months depending on type, even if the light still looks bright. UV output fades long before visible light.
- **Provide shade**. The animal should always be able to leave the UV.

Which reptiles need it? Bearded dragons, blue tongue skinks, chameleons, Chinese water dragons, green iguanas, uromastyx, tortoises, aquatic turtles and box turtles all need strong UVB. Leopard geckos, crested geckos, corn snakes and ball pythons are more flexible: low-level UVB measurably helps their bone health and natural behavior, and our guides recommend it, even though they can survive without it. Geckos and snakes get very low settings; they are not sun-baskers.

Humidity and habitat

Humidity varies enormously, and mixing it up is a classic mistake:

- **Dry species:** uromastyx (about 10 to 30 percent), leopard gecko (30 to 40 percent), arid tortoises (about 30 to 50 percent), Australian blue tongue skinks (30 to 40 percent).
- **Middle range:** corn snake (about 40 to 60 percent, higher during shed).
- **Humid species:** crested gecko (60 to 80 percent), ball python (60 to 80 percent), green iguana (60 to 80 percent), Chinese water dragon (70 to 80 percent), box turtle (60 to 80 percent), and red-footed tortoise (60 to 80 percent).

Use a digital hygrometer at mid-height. Too dry causes stuck shed and dehydration; too wet and stagnant causes skin infections, shell rot and respiratory trouble. Ventilation matters just as much as humidity.

Substrate

Substrate is the material on the floor. Burrowers like uromastyx want deep, diggable material; humidity-loving species want something that holds moisture; young animals and sick animals do better on plain paper so you can watch droppings. Avoid loose sand and small-particle material for animals that might swallow it, and avoid cedar and pine shavings, which release harmful oils. Follow the species guide.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition



Feeder insects and frozen-thawed rodents for the carnivores and insectivores, leafy greens and vegetables for the herbivores, and a mix for the omnivores. Match the menu to the species before you buy.

Feeding is the part of reptile keeping that surprises families most. It is a recurring chore and a recurring cost, and it is the reason many reptiles end up being rehomed. Be ready for it before you buy.

Feeder insects: a living supply chain

Insect-eating lizards (leopard geckos, bearded dragons when young, chameleons, water dragons) need live feeders such as crickets, dubia roaches and black soldier fly larvae. That means you will be buying, housing and feeding a second set of animals. Good feeders are **gut-loaded** (fed nutritious food for a day before being eaten) and **dusted** with calcium and vitamins. Dubia roaches are widely considered the gold standard because they are meaty and easy to keep; crickets are a solid second. Never feed wild-caught insects, which can carry pesticides and parasites, and never feed fireflies or lightning bugs, which are toxic to reptiles.

Frozen-thawed rodents: the snake routine

Snakes eat whole rodents. We recommend **frozen-thawed** prey, which is safer than live (live rodents can injure your snake) and easier to buy in bulk. You will keep a freezer stash, thaw each meal completely, warm it gently to body temperature, and offer it with tongs. Adult corn snakes and ball pythons eat about every 10 to 14 days; younger snakes eat more often. Use a freezer you

can dedicate to food, with the prey bagged and labeled, and never use the kitchen microwave.

Greens, produce and prepared diets

Herbivores (green iguanas, uromastix, tortoises) and omnivores (blue tongue skinks, box turtles, many turtles) need a constant supply of fresh, washed and chopped greens and vegetables. Collards, mustard greens and dandelion greens are staples for many; squash and similar vegetables add variety. Some animals, notably crested geckos, thrive on a **complete prepared diet** mixed with water, which is the easiest feeding routine in the group.

Diet type	Species	Main staple	Common mistake
Insectivore	Leopard Gecko, Chameleon	Gut-loaded, dusted feeder insects	Feeding only one kind of insect, skipping calcium, or using wild-caught bugs
Insectivore with prepared diet	Crested Gecko	Complete prepared powdered diet, with occasional insects	Treating insects as the main food, or offering no variety
Omnivore (insects and plants)	Bearded Dragon, Chinese Water Dragon, Blue Tongue Skink, Box Turtle	A balance of insects or protein and chopped greens, shifting with age	Too many insects for adults, too little greens, or too much fruit
Herbivore	Green Iguana, Uromastix, Tortoise	Fresh dark leafy greens and weeds; tortoises also graze and eat hay	Feeding any animal protein to iguanas, too much fruit, or iceberg lettuce
Carnivore (rodents)	Corn Snake, Ball Python	Correctly sized frozen-thawed mice or rats	Prey that is too large, feeding too often, or live prey
Carnivore or omnivore (aquatic)	Aquatic Turtle	A mix of quality prepared turtle food, protein and plants, shifting with age and species	Overfeeding, dirty tank water, and an all-meat diet

Supplements

Calcium and vitamins matter for any insect-eating or herbivorous lizard. In general, plain calcium is dusted on most feedings and a calcium-with-D3 or multivitamin product is used on a set schedule; the exact rotation varies by species and by the UVB you provide, so follow the species guide. Too much is a problem as well as too little.

Water

Always provide clean water. Some species drink from a dish, some lap droplets from leaves, and chameleons often need a dripper or misting routine. Aquatic turtles live in their drinking water, so the tank must be filtered and changed on schedule.

The ongoing chore

If you add it up, the food side of a reptile is a daily or weekly job for a decade or more: buying bugs or thawing mice, washing greens, dusting supplements, cleaning dishes, and removing uneaten food so it does not rot. That is not a reason to avoid reptiles. It is a reason to choose one whose diet you will actually keep up with.

Shop the food and supplies: Browse Reptile & Amphibian Food and Live Feed Delivered!.

SECTION 7

Lifespan & Commitment

Reptiles tend to live far longer than their size suggests. The cute baby from the store may be with you for the rest of your children's childhood, and sometimes your own.

Group	Species	Typical lifespan
Short to medium	Veiled Chameleon (females 3 to 5, males 5 to 8 years), Bearded Dragon (10 to 15), Chinese Water Dragon (10 to 15), Green Iguana (10 to 20)	Roughly 3 to 20 years
Long	Leopard Gecko, Crested Gecko, Corn Snake, Blue Tongue Skink (15 to 20+), Uromastix (15 to 25)	Roughly 15 to 25 years
Very long	Ball Python (20 to 30, with records beyond 40), Aquatic Turtle (20 to 30+)	20 to 40 years
Multi-generational	Tortoise (40 to 80+), Box Turtle (40 to 50+)	Often longer than the keeper

What a long commitment really means

- **A backup plan.** Name a person who could take the animal if you cannot, and put it in writing, especially for tortoises and box turtles.
- **A budget that outlasts the novelty.** Costs do not shrink after the first year.
- **Willingness to adapt.** Your home, job, partner and children will change over 20 years. The animal will not.
- **A rehoming plan that does not involve the wild.** If you can no longer keep an animal, contact a reptile rescue, a reputable breeder or a reptile-savvy shop. **Never release a pet reptile outdoors.** It will almost certainly die, and it can harm native wildlife through disease or competition, which is why it is illegal in many places.

Shorter lived species, such as the chameleon, are not an easier commitment. They are more fragile and their final years can involve heavier medical care.

SECTION 8

Handling, Temperament & Families

Reptiles are not cuddly. Even the friendliest bearded dragon or corn snake tolerates you rather than loving you, and the trust you build is quiet. The right match is one whose personality fits how your family actually behaves.

Temperament at a glance

- **Calm and handleable:** bearded dragons, leopard geckos, corn snakes, ball pythons and blue tongue skinks. Most settle into a routine of short, calm handling sessions once they get used to you.
- **Handleable but jumpy or delicate:** crested geckos (quick, can drop their tails) and uromastyx (calm, but shy at first).
- **Flighty, strong or stress-prone:** Chinese water dragons when young, green iguanas as they mature, veiled chameleons at any age.
- **Watch, do not hold:** chameleons, aquatic turtles and box turtles do best as observed animals. Handling stresses them, and aquatic turtles are particularly likely to carry Salmonella.
- **Handle sparingly:** tortoises tolerate short, supported handling when small, but should not be passed around.

Handling basics

1. **Let a new animal settle** for several days before handling. Leave it alone except for food and water.
2. **Wash your hands before and after.** Before, to remove scents that can read as food; after, for Salmonella safety.
3. **Support the whole body.** Never grab by the tail, which can detach on many lizards. Never lift a turtle or tortoise by the shell edges over hard floors.
4. **Keep sessions short and calm,** especially at first, and put the animal back before it shows stress.
5. **Never handle right after a meal,** which can cause regurgitation, particularly in snakes.
6. **Read the signals.** Hissing, gaping, puffing up, rapid tail movements, trying to flee or darkening color all mean stop.

Families and children

- Children can enjoy a reptile with an adult in charge of the equipment and hygiene. The child can help with feeding, misting and watching.
- Very young children should always be supervised and should never kiss, snuggle or put reptiles near the mouth.
- **Salmonella** risk is higher for children under five, pregnant women, older adults and anyone with a weakened immune system. Many health agencies advise against keeping reptiles in homes with very young children or immunocompromised members. Talk to your doctor if that applies to your household.
- Reptiles should not roam free in kitchens, on counters or in shared eating areas.
- **Other pets:** dogs and cats can frighten or injure reptiles, and reptiles can pass Salmonella to other animals.

Salmonella hygiene, for every reptile

Nearly all reptiles can carry **Salmonella** bacteria in their droppings and on their skin and shells, and they look perfectly healthy while doing it. A clean, well-kept reptile can still carry it. This is not a reason to avoid reptiles, but it is a non-negotiable hygiene routine every time:

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water after touching the animal, its enclosure, its water or its décor.

- Clean the enclosure and equipment in a tub or sink that is not used for food or dishes, and disinfect the area afterwards. Never wash reptile items in the kitchen sink or bathe a reptile in a bathtub unless you disinfect it afterwards.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling the animal, and keep reptiles out of the kitchen.
- Keep the animal away from food-prep areas and young children's play areas.
- Wash produce, thaw prey and wash feeding tools in a way that keeps them away from your own food.

If anyone in the household develops diarrhea, fever or stomach cramps, see a doctor and mention the reptile.

SECTION 9

Legal & Ethical Sourcing

What the law generally says

Reptile laws vary widely by state, county and city, and they change. **Check your state wildlife agency and your local and housing rules before you buy any reptile.** Some places restrict certain species, some require permits, and some landlords and homeowner associations ban reptiles entirely. We are not lawyers, and nothing here replaces the official rules where you live.

Pennsylvania notes (our home state)

- **Woodland (eastern) box turtle:** Pennsylvania sets a **possession limit of zero** for the woodland box turtle under 58 Pa. Code § 79.3, so keeping one is not allowed. Even if a box turtle is offered to you as a "pet," check with the Pennsylvania wildlife and fish agencies before accepting one.
- **Native reptiles and amphibians:** It is unlawful to bring a native reptile or amphibian into Pennsylvania from another state (§ 79.10), and it is unlawful to buy or sell one taken in Pennsylvania or its offspring (§ 79.9). Pennsylvania's native turtles include painted, map, musk and mud turtles, so a turtle sold under one of those names deserves a careful question about where it came from.
- **Other states differ.** If you are outside Pennsylvania, look up your own state's native-species and exotic-species rules.

The federal 4-inch turtle rule

Since 1975 the FDA has banned selling turtles and tortoises with a shell **under 4 inches long**, except for bona fide scientific, educational or exhibition purposes (not as pets) and for export. This rule exists because tiny turtles are a major source of Salmonella infections in children. If someone offers you a very small turtle, it is a warning sign.

Captive-bred over wild-caught

Always choose **captive-bred** animals from a reputable source. Captive-bred reptiles are healthier, less parasite-ridden, accustomed to human care, and eat prepared foods more readily. Wild-caught animals are often stressed, ill and shipped in poor conditions, and collecting them harms wild populations. Ask the seller where the animal was bred, how old it is and what it eats. Reputable sellers answer without hesitation and will happily let you see the parents or the facility when possible.

Never release a pet reptile

If your animal gets too big, too expensive or too much work, do not turn it loose. A released pet usually dies slowly, and survivors can spread disease and displace native species. Contact a reptile rescue, the seller, or a local reptile society to rehome responsibly.

Responsible buying checklist

- The seller can tell you the animal's hatch date, parentage or origin, and feeding history.
- The animal is alert, well-fed, with clear eyes and clean vents, and it eats readily.
- You have a written care sheet and you have checked it against our species guide.
- You have confirmed your state and local rules.

SECTION 10

Common Challenges & Solutions

These are the group-level problems we see most often. Each species guide covers its own specific health issues in detail.

The impulse buy

What you see: A tiny animal in a store, a tank on sale, and a family that falls in love in ten minutes. **Why it happens:** Stores and shows are designed to make buying easy, and baby reptiles look small, simple and cheap. **What to do:** Walk away, go home, and use the Quick Start checklist and the comparison table. Buy the enclosure and equipment first, run it for several days to confirm the temperatures, and then buy the animal. **When to ask for help:** If you already bought and are unsure, call us at (717) 983-8069 or your reptile vet for a setup check.

The outgrown enclosure

What you see: An animal that fills its home, rubs its nose on the walls, or cannot turn around. **Why it happens:** The baby was housed for its baby size. Iguanas, large tortoises, aquatic turtles and water dragons are the classic cases. **What to do:** Move up to the adult enclosure, or make a realistic plan to rehome to someone with the space. **When to ask for help:** If the animal is injured, stressed or refusing food, see a reptile vet.

Wrong diet from pet-store advice

What you see: A lizard that is thin, fat, weak, or passing abnormal stool; shell or bone deformities; refusal to eat. **Why it happens:** Care sheets in stores are often outdated or generic. Feeding insects to an iguana, fruit to a tortoise, or only one feeder to a gecko are common examples. **What to do:** Follow the species guide, rebalance the diet gradually, and make sure supplements and UVB are correct. **When to ask for help:** Weight loss, tremors, soft jaw or limbs, or a swollen belly need a reptile vet quickly.

Heat mistakes

What you see: A reptile that stays on the cold side, never leaves the basking spot, refuses food, gapes, or has burns. **Why it happens:** No thermostat, a heat rock, a bulb too close, or a thermometer in the wrong place. **What to do:** Check temperatures with an infrared gun and probe thermometers, add or fix a thermostat, and adjust the lamp distance. **When to ask for help:** Any burn, blistering, or lethargy after a heat problem needs a vet.

Humidity mistakes

What you see: Stuck shed, shriveled skin or wrinkled eyes (too dry), or mold, skin infections and wheezing (too wet). **Why it happens:** Using a desert setup for a humid species or the reverse, or poor ventilation. **What to do:** Use a digital hygrometer, adjust misting and substrate, and check the species range. **When to ask for help:** Wheezing, bubbles at the nose or mouth, or retained shed around toes and eyes warrants a vet visit.

Missing or old UVB

What you see: Soft or bent bones, tremors, a swollen jaw, weak limbs, a soft shell, or a lethargic animal. **Why it happens:** No UVB, the wrong bulb, a bulb too far away, or a tube that has aged past its useful life. **What to do:** Install the correct UVB, replace tubes on schedule, and review calcium supplements. **When to ask for help:** This is a medical emergency. Signs of metabolic bone disease need a reptile vet promptly.

Handling stress

What you see: Puffing up, hissing, color darkening, thrashing, tail dropping, or hiding constantly. **Why it happens:** Too much, too fast, or the wrong species for handling (chameleons, aquatic turtles and box turtles). **What to do:** Reduce handling to short, calm sessions, or stop entirely for stress-prone species. **When to ask for help:** If a normally calm animal turns defensive

suddenly, check for pain or illness with a vet.

Not enough vet access

What you see: A sick animal and no one to call. **Why it happens:** Many clinics do not treat reptiles, and reptiles hide illness until it is advanced. **What to do:** Find an exotics or reptile vet before you need one, and schedule a baseline checkup with a fecal test. **When to ask for help:** Do not wait. Loss of appetite beyond what is normal for the species, weight loss, swelling, or labored breathing need prompt care.

Rehoming

What you see: A family that can no longer keep a pet that has outgrown its welcome. **Why it happens:** Size, lifespan, cost, a move, or a change in life. **What to do:** Contact the seller, a reptile rescue or a local reptile society. Be honest about the animal's health and history. **When to ask for help:** Never release the animal outdoors. If you are stuck, call us and we will help you think through options.

Lonely or mixed animals

What you see: Bites, missing tail tips, constant hiding or one animal that dominates food. **Why it happens:** Most reptiles live best alone. Housing two together to keep them company usually leads to stress, injury or one animal bullying the other. **What to do:** House each animal separately unless a species guide specifically says otherwise. **When to ask for help:** Any injury from a cage mate needs vet attention.

SECTION 11

Routine Care at a Glance

Details vary by species, so follow the full species guide, but this table works across the group.

Frequency	Task	Notes
Daily	Check temperatures, lights and water	Look at the basking spot, cool end, UVB and timers
Daily	Look at the animal	Alert, clear eyes, normal posture, moving normally
Daily	Refresh water and remove droppings or uneaten food	Spot clean to avoid bacteria and mold
Daily or every few days	Feed insect eaters, herbivores and omnivores	Fresh greens daily for herbivores; insects every day or every few days by age
Every 5 to 14 days	Feed snakes	Frozen-thawed prey, thawed completely; adults eat less often
Weekly	Weigh or visually check body condition	Weigh small animals; watch for weight loss
Weekly	Wipe down surfaces and clean dishes	Use a separate sink or tub and wash your hands
Weekly	Check feeder insect colony	Fresh food, remove dead bugs
Monthly	Deep-clean the enclosure	Replace substrate as the species needs and disinfect
Monthly	Test your equipment	Verify the thermostat, thermometers and hygrometer against a second tool
Every 6 to 12 months	Replace UVB tubes	Follow the manufacturer and the species guide
Yearly	Reptile vet checkup with a fecal exam	Even healthy animals benefit
As needed	Soaking, shed checks	Help with stuck shed only if the species guide says to

SECTION 12

FAQ

What is the best reptile for a beginner?

The best beginner reptiles are the leopard gecko, the crested gecko, the corn snake and the bearded dragon. All four are hardy, widely bred in captivity, calm with handling, and forgiving of common first-timer mistakes. Pick the one whose food and space needs fit your life: a leopard gecko if you do not mind feeder insects, a crested gecko if you want the least bug handling, a corn snake if you prefer a snake and a freezer of frozen-thawed mice, or a bearded dragon if you want the most interactive lizard and have room for a larger setup. Skip green iguanas, veiled chameleons and Chinese water dragons for a first reptile.

What is the easiest reptile to take care of?

The leopard gecko and the corn snake are usually the easiest, followed closely by the crested gecko. They have small footprints, forgiving temperaments, and simple routines once the setup is right. Easy does not mean effortless, though. Every reptile needs correct heat with a thermostat, proper lighting, a good diet, clean water and regular hygiene, and each one lives for well over a decade.

Which reptiles like to be handled?

No reptile "loves" being held the way a dog does, but some tolerate and even seem to enjoy calm handling. Bearded dragons, corn snakes, ball pythons, leopard geckos and blue tongue skinks are the most handleable. Crested geckos can be handled with patience but are jumpy. Chameleons, aquatic turtles and box turtles are better admired than held, and tortoises should only be handled briefly and with full support. Always wash your hands after handling any reptile.

Do all reptiles need UVB light?

No, but most daytime lizards, tortoises and turtles do. Bearded dragons, blue tongue skinks, chameleons, Chinese water dragons, green iguanas, uromastix, tortoises, aquatic turtles and box turtles need strong UVB to make vitamin D3 and absorb calcium, and without it they develop painful metabolic bone disease. Leopard geckos, crested geckos, corn snakes and ball pythons are less dependent on it, but low-level UVB measurably helps their bones and behavior, and our guides recommend it. Use a bulb designed for reptiles and replace it on schedule, because UV output fades before the light looks dim.

Which reptile is best for a child?

For a child, the leopard gecko and the corn snake are the most common recommendations, with the bearded dragon a good choice for an older child. An adult must always be responsible for the heat, light, feeding and hygiene, because children cannot reliably manage those on their own. Very young children, pregnant women and anyone with a weakened immune system face a higher Salmonella risk, so talk to your doctor if that describes your household. Avoid chameleons, iguanas and turtles as a child's first pet.

How long do pet reptiles live?

Lifespans range from a few years to many decades, and they vary by individual and by care. A female veiled chameleon may live 3 to 5 years, a bearded dragon 10 to 15, leopard geckos, crested geckos, corn snakes and blue tongue skinks 15 to 20 or more, ball pythons 20 to 30 or more, aquatic turtles 20 to 30 or more, and tortoises and box turtles 40 to 80 years or beyond. Plan for the long end of the range, and name a backup keeper.

What reptiles stay small?

Leopard geckos (7 to 10 inches), crested geckos (6 to 10 inches), box turtles (about 5 to 7 inches), smaller uromastix species (around 8 to 12 inches) and musk and mud turtles (3 to 5 inches) stay on the smaller side. Even so, small does not mean easy or

low-maintenance: box turtles live 40 to 50 years or more, and some of the smallest need very specific habitats. Remember that tortoises and aquatic turtles vary widely by species, and a baby of almost any reptile looks small.

Do reptiles carry salmonella?

Yes, nearly all of them can. Reptiles often carry Salmonella bacteria in their droppings and on their skin and shells without looking sick, and it can cause serious illness in people, especially young children, older adults, pregnant women and anyone with a weakened immune system. Wash your hands with soap and warm water after touching any reptile or anything in its enclosure, keep reptiles and their gear out of the kitchen, do not kiss or snuggle them, and clean equipment away from food areas. Check with your doctor if anyone at home is at higher risk.

How much does it cost to set up a reptile enclosure?

It depends heavily on the species, so use this as a general guide only. A leopard gecko or corn snake setup is the most affordable, a crested gecko or bearded dragon costs more because of the tall or large enclosure and lighting, and large lizards, tortoises and aquatic turtles cost the most, often much more than the animal itself. Budget for the enclosure, heat, thermostat, UVB, thermometers, substrate, hides and décor, then add monthly food and electricity and yearly bulb replacements and vet visits. Prices vary by region and supplier, so price the full list before you commit.

Is a snake or a lizard better for a first reptile?

Both can be great, so choose by lifestyle. A corn snake needs only a weekly or every-other-week feeding of frozen-thawed mice, a tight-fitting enclosure and a thermostat, which suits busy families who are comfortable with rodents. A lizard such as a leopard gecko or bearded dragon needs more frequent feeding and often live insects but gives you a more active, daytime animal to watch. If live insects or a freezer of mice would make you uncomfortable, the crested gecko is an easy middle path.

***Ready to shop?** Start with Reptiles & Amphibians. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters.*

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Here at Walnut Creek Supply, 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters across the country, so your reptile supplies help animals in need while you care for the one at home. We are a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own food, keep our own animals, and stock only what we would put in front of our own pets: no mystery ingredients, no cheap filler.

Choosing a reptile is a big decision, and we are happy to talk it through. Call us at (717) 983-8069 with your questions, and when you have narrowed your list, open the species guide and take your time with it. A thoughtful choice now means a healthy, happy animal for years to come.

From our family to yours, thank you for giving a good home to a scaly new friend.

Walnut Creek Supply — Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania