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Old World Chameleon Care

Chameleons have been kept in captivity for the last 20 years. Thousands of chameleons have been imported into the U.S. every year over the past two decades. Until recently, widespread captive breeding has not occurred here in the U.S., and since then only with a few selective species. Two chameleons that have reproduced in the U.S. with great success recently are the Jackson's chameleon and the veiled chameleon. Most other chameleons are imported.

Natural History

Chameleons are arboreal (tree dwelling), insectivorous/carnivorous lizards of the "Old World" (Africa, Asia, and Europe). Unlike the new world chameleons (Anoles), true chameleons have a laterally compressed body, fused digits, and a prehensile tail. They also have independently rotating eyes, a very long tongue, and the ability to "change color shades". They move with a halted gait that resembles leaves blowing in the wind. This movement is used when stalking insects as both eyes are focused forward on its prey. The sticky tipped tongue is projected outward and their prey is caught. The Jackson's chameleon is sexually dimorphic, as the males have horns. Male Veiled chameleons have spurs from their back feet. Chameleons are easily stressed, and most do not enjoy being held.

Caging

Chameleons are territorial, solitary animals in the wild and should be kept singly in captivity except during breeding season. Cage enclosures should be designed for space, ventilation, adequate lighting, and heat sources. Cages should be made of glass, non-abrasive screens, wood, or hard plastics. Cage décor should be sturdy live plants or trees. Vines may also be pieced together and adorned with synthetic plants. Live trees should have the soil covered with plastic or gravel to prevent insect prey from eating from fecal-contaminated soil. The cage floor should be wired (for feces to drop through) or any cleanable flat surface. The cage should have a basking spot and full spectrum ultraviolet lighting.

Lighting

Incandescent bulbs used in the aluminum domed clip on light fixtures should be placed outside the cage to prevent lighting burns. Broad-spectrum lighting with ultraviolet should also be used to simulate the natural lighting of the sun (Exo Terra, Lumichrome, Chromalux, Vita-lite, or Durotest). The ultraviolet lights are important for many natural behaviors, reproductive, and vitamin D3 production. These lights are effective if they are 2 feet or less away from the chameleon and changed every 6-8 months. Glass and plastics filter out UV light as well.

Temperature

Desert species such as the veiled chameleon requires basking spots reaching 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Tropical species such as *C. parsoni*, *C. senegalensis*, and *C. pardalis* require basking spots up to 90 degrees. The basking light sets up temperature gradients and healthy chameleons regulate to a place in the cage comfortable to them. Nighttime temperatures should drop 5-10 degrees Fahrenheit for both desert and tropical species.

Montane (mountain dwelling) species such as the Jackson's chameleon, Fisher's chameleon, mountain chameleon and dwarf Chameleons, require lower temperatures. Basking spots should be about 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Humidity for most chameleons is best between 50-70%.

Watering and Feeding

Chameleons in the wild drink water as it condenses on the leaves. In captivity, this situation must also be duplicated. Daily misting or leaves in the cage can provide water, by pet store drip systems, IV bags and tubes, or by an aquarium power head fountain. Sunken eyes can be a sign of dehydration.

Feeding and nutrition is extremely important. Commercially available crickets are often deficient in nutrients such as protein, calcium, and vitamins. The following guidelines will be helpful in feeding your chameleon.

Offer a variety of insects including 50% crickets, 50% other insects including: wax worms, meal worms, king meal worms, Madagascan Hissing cockroaches, South American cockroaches, and silk moths.

Supplement the diets of insects for several days prior to feeding. Place a small dish of finely ground dog food with a calcium supplement, a slice of orange, and greens in with your crickets.

Female chameleons should be given more calcium supplementation during egg laying. This can be accomplished by the shake and bake technique of the crickets with and finely ground calcium powder (such as Tums tablets--any flavor). However, some chameleons do not like powdered crickets.

Whenever possible, supplement the diet with wild caught insects. Flies, grasshoppers, cockroaches, non-Monarch butterflies, moths, etc. are all good supplements.

Newborn 3-4 day old pinkie mice can be fed to larger species.

Common Medical Problems

Parasites

Metabolic Bone Disease- occurs if eating non-gut loaded insects or if not eating well

Dehydration

Stress!!!