

GECKOS

Introduction

Geckos are the most primitive group of lizards. There are more than 750 species, and they are second only to the skinks in numbers and distribution. Because they are such a large group, there are exceptions to many familiar gecko characteristics. Most geckos have a spectacle similar to that seen in snakes, but some types have true eyelids. Most geckos are cryptically colored and nocturnal, but a few are brilliantly colored and active by day. These diurnal forms have round pupils, while most geckos have vertical pupils.

One of the most well known of gecko characteristics is the widened clinging toe pads, enabling the animals to crawl up vertical surfaces and even across ceilings. Again, there are some gecko forms lacking these pads and most of these are terrestrial. They come from tropical and subtropical climates around the world, as well as deserts. Some live only in close association with man. The only factor limiting their distribution is their inability to survive prolonged freezing temperatures. There are 5 native U.S. species and, at last count, 5 introduced species that have taken up residence in the United States.

Geckos are among the most vocal lizards. “Gecko” itself is an approximation of the raucous cry of the Asian tokay gecko. One caution to the first time gecko-culturist, gecko tails break off. Please be very careful when moving your animal. Even though the tails may eventually regrow, they usually are not as nicely formed as original.

Captivity Requirements

Because of their wide distribution and physical diversity one must consider the individual type of gecko when setting up suitable house and meeting water, dietary, and breeding requirements. In general, geckos require one of two types of housing. One for climbing species, a tall cage with plenty of “cage furniture” for climbing and hiding is necessary. Another for ground dwelling species, a cage with plenty of floor space should be provided, with objects that can be crawled around and under.

Water should be available in a small dish. Tropical species need misting daily or every other day. The cage should not be allowed to remain wet all the time. Desert species still require some moisture and misting two or three times a week is recommended. Diurnal (active by day) and some crepuscular (appearing or active in the twilight) species require basking sites and the use of Vita-lite fluorescent tubes. Temperatures may be maintained

between 65-75° F at night and 75-85° F during the day. Some desert species can tolerate temperatures to 90° F, but this extreme temperature is not recommended.

Feeding

Most geckos will accept a variety of food items, although some species will only eat selected, hard to obtain food items such as termites. Depending on size, most geckos will eat mealworms, waxworms, crickets, roaches and pinky mice. Some special groups will eat baby food or small pieces of fruit in addition to their insect diet. A powdered vitamin should be used to “dust” the insect food items, which are deficient in vitamins A, D3, and calcium. Supplementation of these vitamins and minerals is extremely critical, especially in egg-laying females. Ground eggshells can be placed in a small dish and female geckos will seek out and eat the shells right from the dish. They will also eat calcium and vitamin D3 supplements, such as Cal-D-Tron, in this manner. Insects contain too much phosphorus. The desired calcium-phosphorus ratio is 3:1 to 4:1 in a supplement.

Breeding

With adequate calorie intake and proper vitamin and mineral supplementation, most geckos will breed readily. Sometimes breeding must be triggered by the use of a cooling-off period, increasing day length, and/or separating pairs and reintroducing them. Snake like gecko eggs can be incubated the same way as incubation snake eggs. Hard shelled eggs can be kept in small containers with high humidity. Incubation periods can be extremely variable, from 40-250 days. The most common incubation period is about 60 days. Care of the young is usually similar to the care of the adult of that species.

Diseases and Other Medical Considerations

Geckos are relatively free of parasites and diseases that are clinically diagnosable or treatable. Mites are the most common parasites and are bright red in color. They can be treated with a piece of “no-pest” strip, sealed in a container such as a film canister with some small holes. Leave this in the cage for 1-2 hours, and repeat this treatment weekly for 4-5 weeks to kill any hatchling mites.

The most common problem is inadequate care during shipping and holding of the animals at the place of sale. Buying from a knowledgeable dealer or breeder can eliminate many problems.

Recommendations

The African fat-tailed gecko, *Hemidactylus* *caudicinctus*, and the leopard gecko, *Eublepharis* *macularius*, are very hardy geckos that tame easily, and are easy to breed in captivity. Of the two, the leopard gecko is less expensive, and is represented in many collections. The tokay gecko, *Gekko* *gekko*, is very common in pet shops, is cheap, and has nice coloration of turquoise to navy blue with various red spots. The tokay's only disadvantage is the fact it is very aggressive and can rarely, if ever, be tamed. It is also capable of inflicting a nasty bite.