

# **Green Iguanas**

## **Introduction**

One of the most commonly seen and frequently purchased lizards is the green Iguana. It is an arboreal (tree living), diurnal (daylight active), tropical lizard of Central and South America. Iguanas have been introduced in Florida. In nature, green iguanas are almost completely herbivorous (plant eating). If properly cared for, an iguana can live 12-15 years and grow to 6' and 15 lbs.

Proper caging, lighting, and heating should be set up prior to purchase. Purchase a lizard from a reputable shop with clean, uncrowded cages. A healthy baby iguana is normally bright-eyed and bright green. There should be no discharge from the mouth, eyes, or cloaca and the mouth should be a clean, bright pink. There should be no folds of skin along the sides. The animal will have a full or pot-bellied appearance. The tail and rear legs should be plump and fleshy to the touch. The animals should be alert, watching movement near the cage. When attempting to catch the animal for closer inspection it should be almost frantic in its attempt to elude handling, whipping its tail and even attempting to bite. A lizard that is always sleepy, that lies at the bottom of its cage, or seems "tame" is most likely ill. Newly caught reptiles frequently have ticks. You will see black "spots" partially hidden under the scales. When checking for ticks, make sure to check in the nostrils and folds of skin between the legs and body, as well as checking the folds of the cloaca. Green iguanas can make interesting long-lived pets only if given adequate care. Failure to do this will quickly result in illness and death.

## **Captivity Requirements**

Providing the proper temperature, humidity, and light requirements for an iguana requires special effort. If properly cared for, the 8-12" baby iguana will grow to 4-5' in a few years. Young iguanas should be kept in an aquarium. Although a 10-gallon tank may seem initially suitable, a high 20-gallon or 29-gallon is probably better to begin with, a 55-gallon tank should be considered. One should still anticipate having to build or purchase larger cages as the animal grows. Some books advocate letting the animal have the run of the house when larger. This is not good. Iguanas may fall from curtains, bookshelves, or house plants, causing injury to themselves and furnishings.

The iguana likes to sleep about 10 hours per night, so the light cycle of the room it is in should permit at least 10 hours of complete darkness. The

cage should be kept at 88° F at night and 70-79° during the day. A “hot” spot or basking area should be provided during the day reaching 100-110° F. This allows the animal to regulate its own temperature as needed by moving in and out of the basking area. A thermometer is a necessity. The temperature should be checked, both at the lowest level the iguana will use in the cage, and at the spot where the basking light illuminates the basking spot. The hot spot can be created with a hot rock and a heat lamp. The lamp can imply be a reflector bulb on top of the screen top or suspended inside the cage. Be absolutely certain that the iguana cannot get onto the heat lamp or a serious burn may result.

The cage should never be constantly wet, but the cage (and iguana) should be sprayed several times a week. There should always be a dish of clean water, large enough for the iguana to soak in.

The bottom of the cage can be covered in newspaper, which is cheap and easy to clean, bark chips, or Astroturf for a more decorative look. The use of crushed corn cob or kitty litter makes the environment too dry and/or dusty, which can cause major health problems and is terribly time consuming and messy to clean. Wide natural tree limbs should be available for climbing and basking. Large pieces of bark securely propped against the side of the cage are good for climbing. Rocks and plastic plants can be added to make an aesthetically pleasing cage. Live plants will usually be eaten quite quickly, and some house plants are poisonous.

Natural sunlight and/or fluorescent ultraviolet light should be available 12 to 13 hours a day, year round. This wavelength of light is required for the conversion of dietary Vitamin D into its active form. Without Vitamin D metabolic bone disease occurs. Plant lights do not emit ultraviolet light and are of no value.

### **Feeding**

Healthy, young iguanas need to be fed daily. Older animals should be fed several times a week. Baby iguanas should be fed equal parts dog food and/or Trout Chow and green vegetables including leafy (not head) lettuce, thawed frozen mixed green vegetables, spinach, and whole dandelions. Fruits such as apples, bananas, and grapes can be included occasionally. Food should be diced or shredded so it can be easily swallowed and be at room temperature. Remember, the baby iguana has a small mouth and needs small pieces of food. Older iguanas can have a greater portion of vegetable material and larger pieces of food. Even such diets require frequent supplementation of multiple vitamins and minerals, especially Vitamin D and calcium. Supplements frequently used include Pet-Cal dog vitamins,

Avitron/Avimin bird vitamins, Cal-D-Tron, and Trivisol baby vitamins. Washed eggshells are a good source of calcium. Mix the vitamins right into the food. To serve the food you can put it directly onto the newspaper (not on bark chips, litter, or Astroturf) or in a dish with very low sides. Plastic tops from margarine tubs or coffee cans work well, especially for baby iguanas.

Iguanas require the help of certain intestinal bacteria, protozoans, and nematodes to digest plant material. They derive 30-40% of their energy requirements from the bacterial fermentation of plant material in the hindgut. Unfortunately, they are not born with these microbes which are acquired by eating the fresh, moist feces of adult wild iguanas. A few initial doses should inoculate the iguana for life. In one study, two groups of wild, hatchling iguanas were kept in identical environments and were fed identical diets. However, one group was offered fresh adult iguana feces, inoculating them with the microbes. This group grew at a significantly faster rate than the group denied feces. This suggests that your hatchling or young iguana might be able to digest its diet more thoroughly after fecal inoculation even though foods fed in captivity are probably more digestible than the rough leaves eaten in the jungle. If you wish to inoculate your iguana with adult iguana feces and have a source, a parasite check should be performed by a veterinarian first.

### **Iguana Salad**

Start with ½ cup shredded raw green beans, ½ cup shredded raw orange-fleshed squash (acorn, banana, kobocho, spaghetti or pumpkin), 1/2-3/4 cup alfalfa pellets or crumbled alfalfa hay, 1 med or 2 small raw shredded parsnips (in areas where these are seasonally hard to find, you can substitute with asparagus or cooked or canned lima, navy or kidney beans that have been well rinsed and minced or mashed. If you use beans, add extra calcium to offset their high phosphorus), ¼ cup mashed/minced fruit (strawberries, raspberries, mangos, papaya, figs, cantaloupe) – Thoroughly mix all ingredients together making 3-4 cups. Add in a multivitamin supplement (any multivitamin supplement for birds or reptiles is fine) and a calcium supplement. You do not need to get a calcium supplement that has phosphorous or D3 in it, as the iguana is already getting considerable phosphorous from the plants and multivitamin, and their D3 is best metabolized in their bodies by regular exposure to direct sunlight or special UVB-producing fluorescents. If you will be freezing any of the food, mix in some Brewer's yeast to replace the thiamin (B1) that will be lost when the green vegetables are thawed. Serve the salad in the morning. Once the

iguana is freely eating the salad, greens can be served on the side. If the iguana will only eat the greens, stop feeding them greens and only put down salad, fresh every day. When they start feeding on the salad generously, you can then start offering greens in the afternoon. Once they assimilate that, you can serve the two together. The salad is actually more nutritious than the greens, not the least of which because they can fit more of the salad into their guts and it is more efficiently digested, than the greens.

### **Diseases and Other Medical Consideration**

The medical problem most often seen in iguanas is metabolic bone disease, due to a deficiency of vitamin D, UV light, or calcium. Symptoms of metabolic bone disease can include soft, bendable bones, muscle twitching, convulsions, paralysis, swollen jaws, joints, or thighs, difficulty in eating, general listlessness, and deformity of fractures of the back, tail or legs. Any lizard showing these symptoms needs veterinary attention.

Another medical problem is abscesses caused by a cage that is excessively damp or dirty. Remember, the iguana cannot escape if the smell or humidity is intolerable. Symptoms are lumps seen or felt under the skin. If not treated, the animal will eventually stop eating and die. Treatment includes cleaning the cage thoroughly, keeping it clean, and taking the animal to a veterinarian who handles reptiles.