

## **CARE of the GREEN IGUANA**

### **Iguanas in the Wild**

The green or common iguana (*Iguana iguana*) is a tree-dwelling reptile native to the tropical and subtropical regions of central and South America and parts of Mexico. The iguana is a solitary creature. Soon after hatching, the young go off to live alone. Iguanas come together only during the breeding season.

The green iguana is a strict vegetarian, feeding primarily on vines, stems, leaves and flowers. The iguana also has a good sense of sight, smell and hearing. It tends to be a wary creature and will hide or flee at the first sign of danger. During the day, iguanas bask on tree branches that hang over the water. When threatened or frightened, the iguana will drop into the water or the ground below.

### **Keeping a Pet Iguana**

Unlike domestic pets that have lived with human beings for multiple generations, pet reptiles, (even those that are captive bred) are still essentially wild animals. Our goal for keeping iguanas in captivity should be to copy their natural environment and diet as closely as possible. With proper care, iguanas can live for up to 12 to 15 years and reach six feet in length.

### **Your Iguana's Environment**

Iguanas are asocial, territorial animals and should be housed singularly. Young iguanas may seem to coexist well at first, but problems soon arise since the larger, more aggressive iguana will physically intimidate its cage mates and monopolize food and heat sources.

Iguanas, particularly those less than 2 years of age, should be confined to their enclosure. Although it may be fun to have your iguana roaming freely around the house, this is not in your pet's best interest unless your home is maintained at 90°F (32°C) and 80% humidity.

Choose the largest aquarium possible to house your pet. A young, healthy iguana will soon outgrow even the largest aquarium. Eventually you may want to consider building a large enclosure for your adult iguana. Give consideration to height for climbing, ease of cleaning, a heat source and good ventilation.

Outfitting your Iguana's Home:

Climbing: Provide sturdy branches and rocks for climbing.

Disinfection: Clean the tank often and disinfect regularly. Dilute bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts hot water) works well. Be sure to rinse well.

Some reports suggest that reptiles are highly susceptible to toxicity from pine cleaners such as Pine Sol and Lysol. Do not use these products under any circumstances!

Escape Proof: Make sure cage tops are secure!

Heat: Along with diet, heat is one of the most important factors for the long-term health of your lizard. Warmth is needed for proper digestion and a strong immune system.

Cage temperature should range from 80-88°F (27-31°C) with basking spots that reach 92-95°F (33-35°C) during the day. Night time temperatures should range from 75-80°F (24-27°C). Provide a temperature range or gradient within the tank that allows your iguana to select warmer or “cooler” areas.

- Place an overhead heat light over one end of the tank safely out of reach of the iguana. Provide branches or shelving at this end of the tank to allow the iguana to climb on when increased heat is desired. Turn off heat lamps at night; ceramic heaters may be left on.
- Provide floor heat with an under-tank floor mat or heat tapes. This heat source should serve to maintain cage temperature at 80°F (27°C) at night.
- Beware of hot rocks since short circuits can cause serious burns. If you *must* have a hot rock, check this item frequently.

\*\*Place thermometers at each end of the cage, at a level that is consistent with where the animal spends most of its time.

Hiding Areas: Like all wild animals, your iguana will be more at ease if it has a safe place to hide. Place a half log, cardboard box, terracotta pottery, PVC pipes and/or cardboard roll from toilet paper or paper towels at both ends of the cage. Plastic or silk artificial plants can also be used and are easy to clean.

Humidity: A target relative humidity of 60-80% is recommended for pet iguanas. Accurate measurement of humidity is recommended with the use of hygrometers.

Place the water dish underneath the heat lamp to promote evaporation and mist the cage walls and lid frequently. Provide good ventilation to avoid mold growth.

Lighting: Adequate lighting is one of the most difficult factors to copy from the natural environment. There is no artificial light that can match the ultraviolet (UV) content of bright natural sunlight.

Provide a full-spectrum UV light source for normal absorption of dietary calcium. Be sure to choose a bulb specifically designed for reptile use that emits light in the UVB range of 290-320 nm. Ultraviolet rays are filtered by glass and plastic therefore natural light and artificial light must not pass through glass or plastic. The UVB spectrum generally degrades after about 6 months; therefore bulbs should be replaced every 6 months.

Substrate: Newspaper and paper towels are the easiest and safest materials to line the cage floor. If AstroTurf is used, have several pieces available for easy, frequent changes to keep the surface dry.

Water: Make fresh water available at all times. A large, heavy water bowl increases cage humidity and allows the iguana to soak.

## Your Iguana's Diet

Salad: A vegetarian diet is best for your iguana.

The bulk of the diet should consist of dark, leafy greens such as turnip greens, mustard greens, beet greens, collards, bok choy, Swiss chard, dandelion greens, parsley, romaine, escarole, carrot tops and/or spinach. Supplement greens with chopped or grated vegetables such as broccoli, zucchini, cauliflower, sweet potato, bell pepper, squash, carrots, okra or sprouts. Avoid iceberg lettuce.

All vegetables should be washed, chopped, and thoroughly mixed to ensure your pet does not preferentially select one food item. Food for the juvenile iguana should be chopped to a fine or medium size. Coarsely chop food for the adult iguana.

You may prepare enough food for several days. Store the salad in the refrigerator in an airtight container. Serve the salad at room temperature or slightly warmer.

Feed juvenile iguanas daily. Adults may be fed daily, every other day or two to three times weekly.

Treats: Fresh fruit may occasionally be added to your iguana's salad. Fruit should make up no more than 5% of the diet and should include nutrient dense items such as papaya, melon, and banana.

Non-toxic flower blossoms such as hibiscus may also be offered as an occasional treat.

Protein: Many older iguana texts incorrectly state that young iguanas are insect-eaters, however green iguanas are actually plant-eaters from birth. High protein diets have been associated with kidney disease in the adult green iguana. Avoid high protein sources such as trout chow, monkey biscuits, dog food and insects. Plant-based protein sources such as legumes or tofu may be offered sparingly (weekly).

Supplementation: Provide a powdered calcium carbonate or calcium gluconate supplement. For most products, juveniles should receive one small pinch per feeding while adults should be supplemented one to two times weekly.

Calcium supplements should be low or devoid in phosphorus with a minimum calcium/phosphorus ratio of 2:1. Avoid products containing Vitamin D as this can lead to toxicity.

A general vitamin/mineral supplement may also be offered once weekly.

*Remember your iguana's survival in captivity is completely dependent on the environment and diet you provide.*

Written 2002; updated 2012.