

Housing, Care and Hygiene.

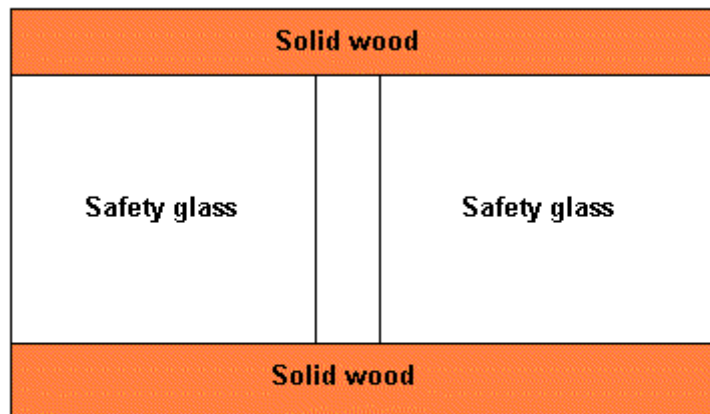
If you are in the process of deciding what reptile you are going to purchase, then it makes sense to find out what the needs of that animal will be. This would obviously include housing and husbandry, so here are a few brief tips that may help you to make your decision and stop you making costly mistakes.

If you are not a DIY buff and the thought of attempting to build some kind of suitable enclosure to house your new animal fills you with dread, then you need to go out and buy. Like many things in life, **'you get what you pay for,'** so don't skimp on the housing. A good quality, sturdy product might be expensive, but it will last for many years if properly cleaned and maintained.

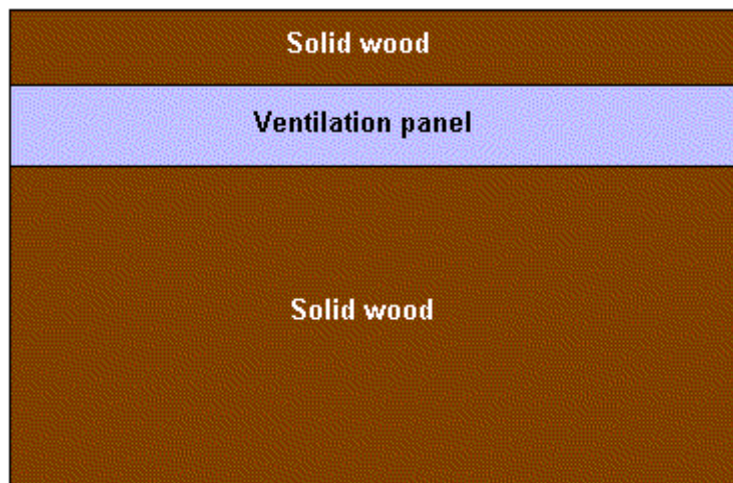
If on the other hand you are a dab hand with a hammer, saw, drill etc., then get yourself down to the DIY store, get the materials and start building! You can research the type of build that is needed by looking in books and of course, checking out the internet. As was said before, don't skimp on the materials; buy the best you can afford, it will pay dividends in the long term.

Types of housing

The argument that often rages is...aquarium tank versus purpose built vivarium? Aquariums, (fish tanks!), are by their very nature watertight and therefore airtight except of course at the top. As you can imagine this does not provide a particularly good situation insofar as airflow is concerned. Also, as snakes are well known as the 'Houdini's' of the animal world, the top may be utilised as an escape route if it is not properly fixed! On the other hand, many people like them for their all-round view and there are now a lot on the market that are targeted specifically for reptile use. For us though, vivariums are by far a superior proposition when it comes to housing reptiles. See the diagrams below for a very basic structure.



Front elevation



Rear elevation

The diagrams show front and rear views of a typical vivarium design. It is effectively a box, preferably made from laminated or plastic faced wood, (for ease of cleaning), and with runners to fit sliding glass or plexiglass doors. The structure must be free of any gaps and should ideally have silicone sealant run along the inside joins, to ensure that there are no gaps that faeces and other 'nasties' can penetrate. At the rear laminate-faced hardboard can be used depending on the size and strength of the snake. A large snake will require a large vivarium which will be best fitted with the same wood as used in the rest of the construction for stability and security. Large snakes such as Pythons are extremely strong and will push against the construction; any weaknesses and the build could be compromised! A ventilation panel must be included to allow a thorough free flow of air. The diagrams above represent a simple

set-up that with care will last for several years. Once again, don't be tempted to skimp, get the best vivariums, or build materials that you can afford.

It is a fact that many of the diseases suffered by snakes and other reptiles in captivity occur as a result of poor husbandry. We have already said that the housing for your



snake needs to be kept simple and the same applies to any accessories and/or decoration that you put in a cage. Remember, simple also means...**easy!** Some people have grandiose plans for their snakes including trying to 'mimic' its natural habitat, which is far too ambitious for the majority of keepers. For a snake to prosper in captivity it must be kept

clean and dry and that will be difficult to achieve if the cage is full to overflowing with superfluous furnishings. If you keep it simple, the snake should remain free of any skin disorders or other disease.

Mess?

Snakes produce 'mess', and the bigger the snake, the more 'mess' it produces. This must be removed, as soon as is practicable, as invariably the snake will glide straight through it resulting in a very dirty, smelly snake that needs to be cleaned along with its' housing! Choosing the right substrate is therefore very important. By far the easiest and cheapest, (though not aesthetically pleasing), is good old newspaper. There are commercially available products, such as mats, but these need washing and then drying which all takes time. The other thing is that they are usually quite expensive though they do look good...the choice is yours. Some people use sand, bark and other such materials, we don't. Cleaning and replacing these creates a **lot of work!**

Apart from what has been mentioned, the minimum amount of furnishing your snake will need is a water bowl which is heavy enough not to be tipped over easily. Also importantly is a hide box. These are simple enough; often a box with a hole large enough for a snake to fit through is suitable. Snakes are secretive and this will

provide the security it needs. If your snake is arboreal, then a stout branch that has been thoroughly cleaned can be securely fastened in the cage/vivarium.

Regular cleaning, preferably using commercially available cleaning products specifically for reptile use, will ensure that your snake is kept free from harmful bacteria that could cause problems. There are a multitude of them on the market, try using different types and see which suits you best. They can be purchased from a well-stocked local pet shop, by mail order or via the Internet.



Remember, the more you put in the cage, the more difficult cleaning becomes. **KEEP IT SIMPLE!**

Hygiene

There have been many stories in the press over the past few of years in relation to salmonella and reptile keeping. The truth is perhaps somewhat different to the sensationalism expounded by the tabloids and other media. In fairness, some organisations i.e. CAPS (Captive Animals Protection Society), have fuelled the debate with the occasional 'half truth'. Whilst it is true that reptiles can carry the salmonella bacteria, the actual facts are that in 1999 out of **17,250** reported cases of human salmonellosis, only **seven** were confirmed as being contracted from a reptile related source. (Information available from Proteus Reptile Trust)

It is relatively easy to eliminate the possibility of contracting this disease by following these few simple precautions:

- avoid putting your hands near your face after handling a reptile
- ensure you follow a scrupulous cleaning routine after handling your reptile
- use antibacterial hand wash
- wear rubber or surgical gloves during your cleaning routine
- **do not** wash cage furnishings in an area where other family members have access to wash or prepare food etc., i.e. the kitchen

Anyone can see that the above is just common sense and logic, something that most people would do without prompting. After all, you wouldn't go picking up dog poop with your bare hands...would you??

These simple steps are all that is needed to assure complete safety. To put it into perspective, S.J.Divers BSc(Hons) BvetMed CertZooMed Cbiol MRCVS says, '*...the risk of contracting Salmonellosis from reptiles is no greater than that of contracting Toxoplasmosis or Toxocara from cats and dogs.*'

Following a few simple rules will ensure that your reptile will live a long life and provide you with years of enjoyment.