

The novelty of exotic pets is undeniable. These wild animals delight and fascinate us, coming in all shapes, sizes and species. An exotic pet is any small animal that is not a cat or a dog. The focus here will be exclusively on reptiles, particularly bearded dragons, iguanas, snakes, turtles and tortoises.

These are all **wild animals** and as such - ideally - should not be kept as pets. However, the reality is that many *are* kept as pets and cannot be released into the wild. So, as responsible owners, we must ensure their welfare needs are met. They, like all animals, deserve the **minimum** standard of care as outlined below in:

the **5 freedoms**

- 1. Freedom from hunger and thirst**
- 2. Freedom from discomfort**
- 3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease**
- 4. Freedom to express normal behaviour**
- 5. Freedom from fear and distress**

Beyond these, each animal also has needs that are specific to its species and vital to its well-being. Before deciding to get a pet, these needs must be considered.

Did you know that all reptiles are **agoraphobic** (are afraid of open spaces), or that they can carry **salmonella**? Do you know their lifespan & adult size?

Bearded Dragons

Bearded dragons originated in Australia and have long been used in the pet trade. There are 5 types and it is important to know which you have in order to provide the correct habitat. Inland bearded dragons require warm, arid conditions as damp causes respiratory problems. Bearded dragons need a basking lamp, with a platform to take them closer to the heat. Like all reptiles, they need a place to hide.



They grow to 12-13in and when young eat insects and greens. As they mature and their growth rate slows, they need very little protein as this can build up on their kidney and liver. **Overfeeding kills reptiles, putting strain on the vital organs.** It is best to feed only 2-3 times per week, and cricket size should be about the width of the gap between your dragon's eyes. The average lifespan for a bearded dragon is 8 years, but they can live up to 15 years.

Lizards



Before purchasing a lizard as a pet you should do some research on the species. Ensure that you can provide the necessary care for your lizard over its entire lifespan. You will need to meet all the animal's essential needs, starting from appropriate housing equipment and conditions. In some cases the **equipment** required to properly care for the lizard may **cost** more than the lizard itself.

You should think about how **large** your lizard will be as an adult. Many could easily grow to be 5-6 ft. (Iguanas such as the one pictured above can easily grow to be this large). It is highly recommended that you acquire a captive bred lizard from a responsible and highly experienced breeder. First time reptile owners should choose a lizard that is easy to handle and care for. The capture of exotic animals in the wild is a cause of suffering and death for a large number of animals some of which may even be endangered - so wild-caught animals should not be purchased.

Snakes

Snakes require regular handling. They have unique requirements and should only be kept by those with the determination to understand and meet their needs. When choosing a pet snake you are making a long-term commitment as many can be expected to live longer than 20 years. Snakes are persistent about finding and squeezing through any small gaps. They are very adept escape artists, so it is essential to acquire an escape-proof tank.



Burmese Python

A captive-bred snake from a reputable breeder is the best choice. Wild caught snakes should be avoided for ethical, legal, and safety reasons. They also tend to be more stressed and prone to parasites and disease and more difficult to tame. Corn snakes are generally docile, and do not get too large.

A python such as the one in the picture above is **not** a suitable pet: it can reach 26 feet in length and a weight of 18 stones!

Turtles & Tortoises

The main difference between turtles and tortoises is that turtles live in water and tortoises live on land. There are hundreds of species, the most commonly kept as a pet being the Red Eared Slider. They are usually sold as hatchlings and many owners do not realise how big they can grow: 25-30cm the females, and 20-25cm the males. They have a red stripe on either side of their head, which gives them their name. The shell is dark green, with a yellow belly. If kept well they can live for 35 years or more.



Above L & R: Yellow Foot Tortoise & Alligator Snapper Turtle

Turtles should enjoy about 12-14 hours of light per day (natural or UV). Water should be kept around 24-25 C°. They love to swim and need lots of space; as a rule of thumb, a turtle with a shell of 2.5cm should have 40L of water available. They also need an area to bask in the sun or under heated bulbs. The tank needs to be kept clean with a good filtration system and heater.

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REPTILES



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