

No. 4.

An Introductory Information Leaflet on Keeping a Pet Snake

Medium sized rodent feeders

e.g. King Snakes,
Rat Snakes,
Corn Snakes,
Bull, Pine & Gopher Snakes,
Small Boas & Pythons

from

in association with

EURO REP
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Europe's Premier
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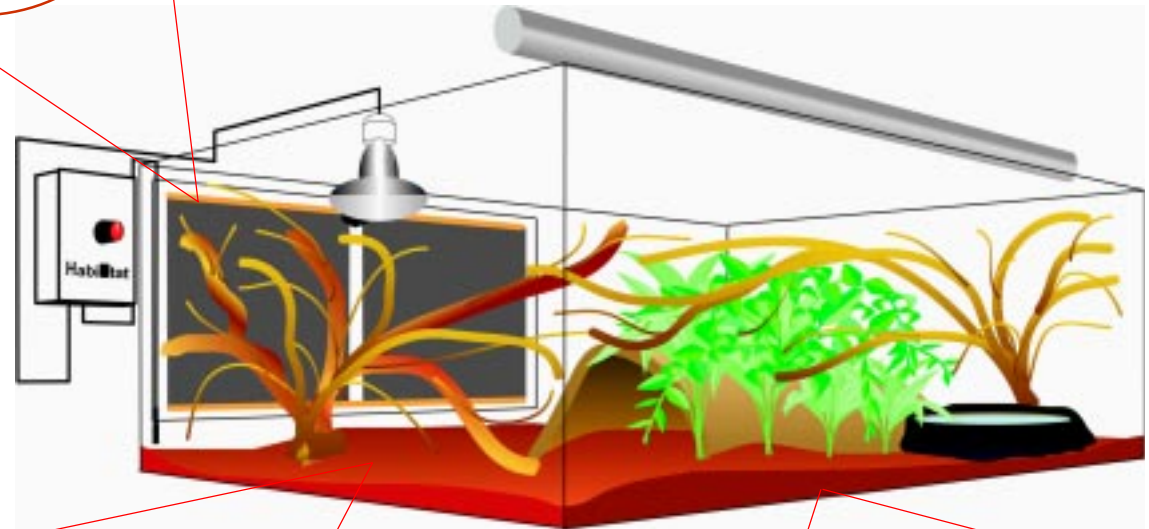
Background Heat

Use a heat mat between half and two thirds the size of the cage to provide background heating. The hottest spot in the cage should not be above 32°C while the coolest should not be below 20°C. Use a *HabiStat Mat - Stat* if the temperature is too hot but put the whole cage in a cooler place if the temperature is not cool enough.

Food: Items that should be offered are mice, from pinkies to adult and rats from pups to small adults. Do not feed anything of unknown or dubious history such as wild or pet rodents or cat and road kills. One of the easiest food for captive snakes of this type, however, are the sausages of blended nutrients especially formulated for snakes. Cut into lengths of one or two sausages and offered on a clean surface this food should provide a complete diet.

Cleanliness and Hygiene: A routine cleaner for all non-porous surfaces could be *Vetaclean* followed by a thorough rinse. Anything that cannot be easily cleaned should be thrown away and replaced. Any little graze or blemish on the animals themselves would benefit from the first aid afforded by dabbing the wound with *Vetadine*. As far as human hygiene is concerned, *Vetasept Surgical Scrub* will clean hands and surfaces while *Vetasept Hand Rub* will allow adequate cleansing and disinfection even in cases when water is unavailable.

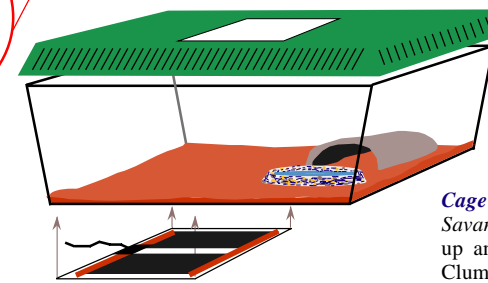
Lights: Snakes do not seem to need artificial lights when kept as pets. They will thrive in cages illuminated with just the room lights. Either a spot or fluorescent lamp could be added as an optional extra.



Optional Hot Spot

A local area of higher temperature can be created, if desired, with a ceramic heater or basking spot lamp. Use them in conjunction with the appropriate *HabiStat* thermostat for precise control. Hot spots should be maintained for the same day-length as the lights, fourteen hours in summer, eight in winter. Or use a *Sun Switch* for day/night and seasonal timing

Cages Suitable for Pet Snakes



Cage Set Up

The cage should be set up to allow an active snake plenty of scope to climb, bask in a hot spot, move to a cooler spot, drink and hunt for food. The snakes should also be able to secrete themselves into refuges and rub themselves against something when shedding their skin.

Simple set up for beginners: A moulded plastic cage is set up with a heat mat taped to the base. The mat should be about half the size of the cage. On to the floor of the cage, *Rain Forest Substrate* or *Savannah Substrate* is spread a very thin layer of no more than 1 cm. (A thicker layer will act as an insulator and block the heat from the mat.) Check with a thermometer that the cage is within the acceptable temperature range. Cork Bark

or *Curio Wood* could be used to make hide or a *Repti-rock* cave could be used. A *Repti-rock* water dish would be the only other essential. When satisfied everything is OK, add the snake!

Cage Decor: Use *Rain Forest Substrate* or *Savannah Substrate* as a base as these will blot up and 'clump' any fouling by the snakes. Clumps of waste can be removed without cleaning the whole tank out. Cork Bark or *Curio Wood* could be used to make an interesting three dimensional display. While draping *Repti-Vines* in the cage will provide refuges the snakes can hide in or move through to loosen shedding skin. *Repti-rock* caves and water dishes would lend even more functionality and security.

Shopping List

Not every thing is needed to begin with, usually one item from each of the categories marked •. Try alternatives as your collection and experience grows. A basic minimum is given to help decide what options to add.

- **Plastic Vivaria**
- **HabiStat, Heat Mats** 6x11/7w
- **Rain Forest Substrate**
- **Repti-rock Dishes, Hides & Caves**
- **Thermometers**

Or a convenient starter kit is available

- **Melamine Vivaria Vivarium Lids**
- **HabiStat, Heat Mats** (6x11/7w, 11x11/12w, 17x11/20w, 23x11/28w, 29x11/35w, 35x11/42w & 49x11/55w) & **Strips** (17x6/10w, 23x6/15w, 35x6/22w & 47x6/30w)
- **Pearlco Bulb Ceramics** (60w, 100w, 150w, 250w, Reflectors & Holders)
- **Basking Spot Bulbs Ordinary, Day & Red Night Types** 100 w & 60w + Lamp holder and Lead
- **Thermometers** (Alcohol, dial, minimum -maximum & electronic digital)
- **Hygrometers** (Dial & electronic digital)
- **HabiStat Thermostats** (Mat-Stat/100w, Temperature/300w, Twin/2x300, Pulse Proportional/600w, Dimming/600w & Night Time Drop Function)
- **HabiStat Light Switches Sun & Moon Switches or Night Eye**
- **HabiStat Cool Control & MiniFan**
- **Repti-Vines**
- **Savannah Substrate**
- **Desert Substrate**
- **Repti-Grass**
- **Cork Bark**
- **Curio Wood**
- **Reptile D₃ & Activa Professional Lights** (18"/15w & 24"/18w)
- **Arcadia Control Units** (15w, 2x15w, 18w & 2x18w)
- **Frozen Rodents**
- **Frozen Prepared Foods**
- **Reptavite**
- **Reptasol**
- **Vetaclean**
- **Vetadine**
- **Vetasept Surgical Scrub**
- **Vetasept Hand Rub**
- **Books & Leaflets**

Pet Snakes...

...Housing

Many types of cage can be used to house snakes. For hatchlings and other juveniles, the moulded clear plastic tanks with a fitted lids are very useful. For larger animals the purpose made vivaria are probably more appropriate. The types with sliding glass doors to the front being especially resistant to escape. Another often used cage is a converted aquarium. A special adapting lid is used to contain the reptiles and house any equipment that may be used.

The cage may not have to be large as many specimens seem to thrive in quite small cages. The length of the cage added to its width should be longer than the total length of the snake. Of course, the cage could be larger as this would allow the animal room to grow and make it easier for the owner to manage the environment.

The cage should be set up in a manner similar to the diagram overleaf. If done correctly it will be warmest next to the mat at about 32°C, while the coolest part of the cage could be nearer 25°C. A specific hot spot can be installed to operate during the day. Light should be present for a similar period; about fourteen hours in summer dropping to eight in winter.

The quality of light needed to keep snakes is a topic of much discussion. Some say diurnal species need full spectrum light while others doubt that but freely admit that benefits may accrue. To be on the safe side a lamp like *Activa Professional* or *Reptile D₃* would do no harm but is not essential.

Much of the success achieved in keeping these snakes will come from the skilful manipulation of ventilation. The snakes cannot stand damp, stagnant or airless conditions. Fresh air moving into the cage is essential. Use the upward draughts caused by heated air rising to flush out the cage and drag fresh air in.

...Husbandry

Pet snakes are best kept on their own as they are easier to manage singly. Adult pairs will often live together quite happily but may need supervision at feeding time. One snake may inadvertently eat another if they both start on the same food item. It may be best not to mix species or specimens of widely differing size in the same cage as some will eat others!

To handle a snake, the whole animal should be gently grasped and held in the hands. Let it move through the fingers but do not grasp it too tightly. The hand should provide support and restraint is applied by slowing down but not stopping the flow of movement. Don't be surprised if the cheeky reptile gives you a harmless nip for your trouble! The wound will probably be quite insignificant but it would be best to clean it like any other minor graze. Bites are, however, quite rare as a more normal defence is to threaten with a vibrating tail and empty strikes. Even these tactics are soon abandoned as the snake settles down to life in captivity.

In time the cage will begin to look scruffy as waste products are deposited. As everything recommended for the cage is washable or disposable, a good clean out is easily done. The cage set up advised in this leaflet is practicable and can be made to look pleasing to the eye. If a more natural set up is envisaged, it may be as well to wait until some experience is gained. In any case, some of the very informative books on snakes could be investigated.

...Food & Feeding

Feed the snakes once each week as adults and a little more frequently if younger. Feed one or two items that can be eaten in five to ten minutes. In the wild mice, rats and other mammals with a few small birds will make up the bulk of the diet. Defrosted frozen mice, ranging in size from pinkies to adults could be offered or even small rats if taken. These frozen foods may

have to be offered warm. They are better than freshly killed animals as many of the parasites affecting snakes are killed by being frozen. In captivity a compromise may have to be made as a totally natural diet is neither readily available nor the type of food many people would be happy offering. An artificial diet made up of minced meats and frozen into sausages was specifically developed to overcome these problems and can be used with confidence.

A water dish kept full of fresh water should always be available. This dish should be quite small so that the snake can drink but makes total immersion difficult. A larger bathing dish can be supplied for a few hours, a couple of times each week. Damp and wet conditions lead to skin ulceration and other diseases.

...Reproduction

To sex these snakes look at the tail of the animal. In males there is a hemipenial bulge posterior to the vent. The males are also generally smaller and slimmer and have longer, slightly thicker tails.

A relatively simple courtship preludes mating and eggs are laid several weeks later. They are not, however, likely to breed in captivity without a winter rest or hibernation. Read up on the more advanced aspects of keeping snakes if breeding is anticipated.

Captive bred babies are commonly available and among these specimens, many colour variations are now offered for sale. These are not different species but mutations, usually with one or more individual pigments missing. King snakes, for example, are a remarkably varied group of animals. There are many described subspecies for most of the species and even then, each subspecies may have several varieties or morphs. However, within a species, all individuals may be expected to be cross fertile. The resulting combinations will make variation almost infinite and occupy breeders of snakes for years to come.

...Health & Disease

These snakes live for about five to ten years in nature but most will be captive bred juveniles when purchased. A similar or longer life may be expected in captivity. They suffer from few diseases and veterinary attention is rarely needed. An environment and diet as described in this leaflet will preclude most problems. Good practice, hygiene and first aid will probably deal with rest. If real disease is discovered, a vet must of course, be consulted. Pet snakes do not pose a real threat to human health. All the normal hygiene precautions regarding humans and animals should, however, be observed.

Four problems probably account for 90% of all captive disease. The first relates to skin and eye problems caused by dirty conditions. Small abscesses occur under the scales and eyes are often inflamed. Damp or wet conditions exacerbate the situation and the disease is avoidable if the cage is completely dry. In spite of them enjoying a bath, they cannot tolerate being wet for prolonged periods.

The second common disease is an infection of the respiratory tract. The snake will 'wheeze', gape and even sneeze. A frothy mucus will also be commonly discharged from the mouth. Raising the cage temperature may alleviate the distress but veterinary intervention is the only real remedy.

Sometimes a snake will be found to have a mouth infection, and this is the third of the most frequently seen problems. A cheesy mass may be seen in the mouth and soreness of the tissue is also common. The symptom of 'mouth rot', *necrotic stomatitis*, is indicative of a more general infection and veterinary advice must be sought. The last, concerns the occasional infestation with ticks or mites. A separate leaflet explains how to cope with this easily avoided nuisance.