

The Forum Magazine of The American Tarantula Society

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Tarantula Care Sheet

Buying A Tarantula

Many people still buy their tarantulas from pet shops, although the Internet is changing that. If you haven't dealt with tarantulas before, and don't know an experienced tarantula keeper, here are some tips to help pick out a healthy animal appropriate to your desires and interests.

- 1.** How is it standing? A tarantula huddled in a corner with its legs tucked under it (the classic spider death pose), that doesn't react, or reacts slowly to touch, is likely dying.
- 2.** Does it have a water dish? Excessive dryness can kill them. Some species need moisture all the time, others don't. For any tarantula, a water dish is a good safeguard. A standard petri dish-sized container with pebbles added (to keep crickets from drowning) is ideal. Do not use sponges or cotton balls. Some sponges are treated with chemicals that may harm your tarantula. Non-treated sponges and cotton balls promote the growth of fungi and bacteria.
- 3.** Can the sellers tell you the scientific name of the animal? There are over 850 species of tarantulas worldwide. Pet shops and websites may use common names unique to that pet shop or website alone. Scientific names are important for finding out what kind of care the spider needs. Ask the seller to find out specific information on the spider or at least what part of the world it came from. If they can't supply any details except a phony common name, perhaps you should shop elsewhere.
- 4.** Can they tell what sex it is or how old it is? Most species of male tarantulas, when mature, develop tibial spurs, little hooks on the undersides of the front legs. The male pedipalps are slightly enlarged and have structures on them. They no longer look like a small pair of walking legs as in the female. Mature males don't live very long, about a couple of months to nearly two years or so in captivity, depending on the species. Adult females may live for decades determined by the species.

All tarantulas with two inch or over legspans can be sexed by an experienced person. If the dealer wants to sell you a tarantula with a legspan greater than two inches, but

cannot tell you the sex, perhaps you should shop somewhere else. Young spiderlings smaller than two inches cannot be sexed. Spiderlings are usually inexpensive, so the best way you can make sure you end up with at least one female is to buy at least three of them. Of course, the more individuals you buy, the better the chances are you'll get females. If you already have a large immature tarantula and want to know the sex, we can do this for you for no charge. See the sexing article on the home page.

Housing

Pet Pals sold in pet shops, work well for many species. Many plastic and glass containers can be adapted for tarantula homes. Make sure the tarantula cannot escape from whatever cage you use.

Different species of tarantulas are used to different conditions. Burrowing species live in holes and some may appreciate deep substrate and dug-in shelters. Many or most burrowing individuals may not burrow, even when given every opportunity. Burrowing species are generally heavier with larger abdomens than arboreal species and should not be kept in tall containers. If they climb up the sides and drop, they can rupture their abdomens or other body parts and quickly bleed to death. They may also catch their feet in window screen-sized tops and lose or break legs or be hurt in a fall. If you use screening for a lid, micro screen or hardware cloth can help avoid these problems. Ground-dwelling species should be kept in cages a bit taller than their own outstretched legspans. Containers should be at least 2 1/2 times the legspan of the individual, by 1 1/2 times. Supply a retreat in the form of a cottage cheese container cut in half, a halved clay flower pot, or some similar object to give them a place to hide if they desire.

Substrates most often used are potting or topsoil (most desirable), peat moss, or vermiculite. There is evidence that plant products may change the habitat facilitating mite infestations, setting the stage for problems, so they should be avoided. Never use cedar or other conifer products since many are toxic to arthropods, or may cause loss of appetite, molting problems, lethargy, and other problems. This includes cypress, orchid bark, and other plant material. Artificial products such as Bed-a-Beast and others have been known to cause mortality, especially if used contrary to label instructions. Some swear by products such as Bed-a-Beast, but most others suspect the pet store is simply trying to get more of your money.

Tarantulas that live in trees (arboreal) don't need the same things that the burrowing species do. Cage height or size is not a serious factor with arboreal tarantulas. Arboreals live in trees and make their tube-web homes in them, in holes, inside bark, or strung between parts of the tree. Solid wood, such as branches, tree trunks, or corkboard are fine for them.

The substrate can be the same used for burrowing tarantulas, but since most arboreals excessively web-up their cages, many keepers do not use substrate. If an arboreal

tarantula doesn't deposit lots of web within their cage, a retreat should be supplied. Good air circulation in a container has been thought by some in the past to be a requirement, however, serious doubt has been cast on this idea in the last few years. The up side is good air circulation may prevent stagnant conditions with very high humidity that can easily breed mold, fungi, bacteria, nematodes and mites.

If your tarantula doesn't require high humidity, a water dish is sufficient without taking any other moisture increasing actions.

Certain species may require higher humidity, at least initially, so try to find out what species you have. With species thought to require high moisture levels, restricting ventilation and wetting the substrate are the most common ways humidity is raised. Misting is usually not practical because of the rapid rate of evaporation among other factors. Mostly, misting simply irritates the tarantula, serving no other purpose.

If there is one rule of thumb concerning keeping tarantulas, it is this: Keep the cage as dry as possible. Even the species thought to require high moisture levels can be gradually adapted over to dry conditions. If you overdo it, and get the cage too dry too fast, the tarantula will nearly always tell you by spending long periods of time hanging over the water dish. If this happens, you should increase humidity and adapt them over to dry environments at a slower rate.

In the case of spiderlings or young tarantulas (arboreal or burrowing), maintaining higher humidity, especially with many South American species, is a good idea and is practiced by nearly everyone. Spiderlings can be kept in small deli cups with the tops perforated with pinholes and with a small amount of potting soil added. Many keepers also include a little moss in which the spiderling may form its retreat. Misting is appropriate in this case. A short shot every other day or so from a spray bottle on the side of the deli cup supplies the spiderling with water (it can drink the water droplets) and keeps the humidity within the small container elevated.

Temperatures best for most tarantula species tend to be from 75-85oF. Up towards 90oF or over, you need to be very careful to keep the water dish full. Tarantulas can be successfully kept colder in the winter, but many may need at a long warm season each year to thrive.

Direct sunlight is never a good idea, and bright lights may also be disturbing. Indirect sunlight may help them set their annual biological clocks, so the total absence of natural light is also not a good idea.

Some tarantula species are very "low-maintenance" pets; others require nearly constant attention. As a general rule, ground dwelling tarantulas from more arid climates are the easiest to keep.

Food & Feeding

The most commonly used tarantula food is store-bought crickets. These are fine, but variety is best, at least in certain parts of the year. If you catch insects for your spider, make sure they haven't been exposed to pesticides. If you suspect a prey item may have been exposed to insecticides, keep it in a cage for a day or two and watch for nervous system related symptoms. Avoid some earwigs and certain beetles (some earwigs and some beetles, such as chafer beetles, can be poisonous to tarantulas when eaten).

Larger tarantulas will often eat baby mice, and many tarantulas will take dead prey, or even pieces of meat. *Drosophila* (small fruit flies) or pinhead crickets are good for small spiderlings, but most will eat easier to get freshly split larger crickets. Tarantulas will stop feeding when preparing to molt so living prey items should be removed. There have been many cases of crickets killing tarantulas while molting.

Handling & Bites

Tarantulas have huge brains compared to most other arthropods, but they still may react in unexpected ways to whatever they perceive as being a threatening situation. Tarantulas, especially the ground-dwellers, can easily be killed by even a short fall; they can be very fragile. The arboreals are far less likely to be injured by a fall, but they tend to be very fast and can easily escape and be difficult to re-capture. Tarantulas possess venom.

There is no scientific evidence of human mortality, but bites from some species can be painful and cause unpleasant symptoms.

Most tarantulas from North, South, and Central America have urticating, irritating hair on their abdomens and/or other areas.

Unlike spider venom, some people can become increasingly sensitive to the hair, perhaps to the point of allergic reaction. Many species can kick these in the air or in some cases press them into an "intruder." This may cause bald spots on the abdomen, which is nothing to worry about. However, these hairs can cause rashes and occasionally eye inflammations in humans. Keep your face away from your spiders and wash your hands after any contact with their bodies or cage bedding. Benadryl may help with rashes.

There are times when you need to move your spider from the cage (as when cleaning). If you're dealing with an especially skittish, fast animal, you can put it in the refrigerator for 10 or 15 minutes to slow it down (not the freezer!). Don't overdo it; the stress of the sudden temperature shock may be hazardous. Gentle brushing (with a small paintbrush) will help get it going where you want it to go. Keep a cup handy to capture an escapee. Some keepers use tropical fish nets to arrest bolting spiders.

Molting & Medical Problems

In order to grow, tarantulas must molt. They do this by “popping the top” of the exoskeleton (“skin”) called the carapace (top of the front body region [prosoma or cephalothorax] where the eyes are located) and then working the body and finally the legs out of the old molt. Usually they turn on their backs or sides to molt. Before molting, they will stop eating for a while. The fasting time may be a few days for a small spiderling, to weeks or several months for larger immatures and adults.

A spider that is upside-down with its legs in the air is almost certainly molting. Don't try to turn it over or touch it, you may injure it. The exception to this is if it begins molting while still right side up. With larger individuals, you may have to assist the molting spider over onto its side to prevent leg damage or loss.

After molting, several days may be needed for the exoskeleton to harden its exoskeleton (new skin) and begin feeding. Don't feed it until it recovers and begins acting “normal” again. Two weeks is a fairly standard time period to wait before resuming feeding. Some spiderlings may resume feeding in a day or two.

Adult tarantulas usually complete a molt within several hours. If your spider gets stuck in its molt, you may need to help it. Try wetting it with water or water with a 1 to 20 parts dilution of glycerin (just stay away from the book lungs). If it goes over a day or so, drastic measures may be needed. You can take a pair of forceps and very gently try to pull off the old exoskeleton by pulling on the ends of the old leg skin.

If your tarantula becomes injured in any way and starts bleeding, it may die if not treated. Hemolymph (tarantula “blood”) is pale blue to cloudy-clear and the clotting systems to stop bleeding may not be sufficient if the wound is large enough. Smaller wounds can be coated with nail hardeners or nail menders. With larger abdominal wounds, the best material is liquid stitches used by vets. Unfortunately, you need a vet to get it, so try “Skin Patch” (used by bowlers) or superglue. Lost legs aren't as likely to bleed as long as the whole leg is cast off (called autotomy). If a spider loses part of the leg, you can force it to throw off the rest by grasping the femur leg segment close to the body with a pair of forceps and pulling up. It's a good idea to triple coat the stump immediately after forced autotomy with nail mender to make certain it won't begin bleeding later on. The leg will gradually regenerate over the next couple of molts, unless the spider is a mature male.

Occasionally a tarantula cage (particularly in damp cages) may become infested with mites. You can reduce the numbers by changing the substrate and cleaning the cage and decorations with warm soapy water or bleach (rinse well). You can also buy predatory mites from a beneficial insectary to kill the pest mites. If you're lucky, a low population of predator mites may maintain itself in the cage, preventing future mite outbreaks.

Placing a few pillbugs or sowbugs in the cage may help with mite and fungus problems. These problems are an indication that you are probably keeping the cage far too moist.

Tarantula Responsibility

Tarantulas are arachnids, which comprise all kinds of wonderful, curious creatures, such as scorpions, whipscorpions, tailless whipscorpions and windscorpions to name a few. They are frightening to many, but arachnids are an extremely beneficial group of animals (except many mites and ticks). Spiders help greatly to control insects that destroy crops or carry diseases. Spiders are so ecologically important, we know they can exist without humans, but humans may not be able to exist without them.

Be responsible with your animals. Don't use them to show off. Learn about them, get to know them. They are more than a novelty.

To Find Out More

For more information on tarantulas and other arachnids, contact:

The American Tarantula Society Website: ATSHQ.org

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Last updated May 2006.

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