

## Lizard – Leopard Gecko

Are you considering a leopard gecko as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Who doesn't love a leopard gecko? With their lips always turned up into a perpetual smile, these are popular pets that come in a rainbow of colours. Sometimes they are referred to as "Leos".

This species hails from the semi-desert lands of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal. They are ground-dwelling geckos that enjoy hiding in holes, crevices, dry tree bark and stones until they emerge to actively start hunting their favourite food – insects.



### Housing

As youngsters, a leopard gecko can be comfortably housed in a 20-gallon terrarium. Once they reach the 7-inch-long mark, they need a home equivalent to 36in x 18in x 18in. It is not a good idea to house two male leopard geckos together as they will often fight.

Because these lizards come from a dry, arid place, the substrate chosen for your new friend should mimic their natural habitat. Excavator clay is a good choice to accomplish this as not only can it cover the bottom of the terrarium, you can create your own unique hides with it. Another good choice is called the DIY substrate 40% organic topsoil + 40% sand + 20% Excavator Clay. Make it muddy, mix well and pack the terrarium floor with it. Make absolutely certain that it is dry before adding your gecko.

Each tank should have a few covered areas for your gecko to hide. Even in a naturally arid habitat, there are areas of increased moisture.

Some damp sphagnum moss inside a hiding area can create a micro-humidity chamber and allow your gecko to seek humidity if desired. Place this towards the cool end of the tank.

### Heat and light

It was previously thought that leopard geckos do not need a light source on their vivarium. This is now known to be incorrect. While they may be awake and moving around more at night, they are actually crepuscular – meaning awake at dawn and dusk. A light source allows them to regulate their bodily processes, even if they are not active while the light is on. Another hot topic is UVB light. Again, it was previously thought that UVB is not necessary, but new evidence is being provided that even the species classed as "nocturnal" can and do benefit from UVB light.

A low UV light (1.0-2.0 UVB) will provide adequate light and UVB for your gecko, and should be turned on for approximately 12 hours per day. Lights are best to be kept on a timer, for consistency.

Temperatures can be measured with an in-tank thermometer and should be as follows:

Basking temperature – 34 -36 Celsius

Warm side – 32 -33 Celsius

Cool side – 21 -25 Celsius

A night time drop in temperature is healthier than maintaining the same consistent temperature all of the time and with this species hailing from semi-desert areas, they can tolerate a drop to 16 Celsius at night. If you find that your house is colder and the temperature drops less than 16, you can use a ceramic heat emitter to achieve the appropriate night time temperatures. Do not use coloured light bulbs for night time heat as reptiles are able to see these lights and it disrupts their day/night cycle.

### **Cleaning**

Fecal matter and any clumped substrate can be cleaned up daily. You may never see shed skin as leopard geckos are one of the few species that normally eat their own shed. It is a defense tactic to not leave their scent around for predators.

### **Diet**

Insectivores by nature. Leopard geckos will eat crickets and several varieties of worms – meal, wax, super, butter, phoenix, silk and horn. It is very important to feed healthy insects to your gecko. Immediately after purchase, insects may be in poor health, as they are sometimes poorly fed prior to being sold. It is a good idea to keep your insects at home for 4-5 days, in a clean enclosure with fresh foods available, prior to feeding them to your gecko. It is a good idea to use a separate container to feed your gecko to prevent them from ingesting their substrate when they eat.

A very shallow water dish can be provided in the cooler end of the tank.

### **Handling**

Handling should always be done in short periods, to begin with, gradually working up to longer periods. Let them come to you – offer your hand, flat, palm up to them, and if they choose to, they will step onto your hand. Carefully and slowly lift them from the enclosure. If they panic and want to run, allow them the option to do so safely. Most often, they want to go back into their enclosure. Do not force them to stay with you. Children should be supervised by an adult when handling the gecko.

Tail drop: Geckos in the wild have a last-resort way of escaping from a predator – they can “drop” their tails. When this happens, their tail literally detaches from their body and wiggles to attract the predator’s attention. The term for this is autotomy. In captivity, this can occur in geckos that are highly stressed, usually with rough and unwanted handling. While it allows the gecko to escape with its life, and a tail will grow back, this is not healthy for the gecko and should be avoided at all costs.

### **Gecko Speak:**

Clicking — Used to communicate with other geckos.

Chirping/Squeaking — Means that the gecko is unhappy with their current situation.

Barking — Leos often bark at their keepers when they are hungry, which is pretty amusing.

Screaming — Juveniles are more likely to scream than adult. This is a defensive behavior intended to startle away a predator. It's fairly effective.

Rapid tail flicks — Rapid tail flicks signal excitement, usually while hunting or interested in mating.

Slow tail swishing — Usually accompanied by an arched back and walking/standing on tiptoe. This is a pretty clear "Leave me alone!"

### **Enrichment**

Out of the terrarium time can be a source of enrichment, as well as the décor that you use inside the terrarium. Leos can be quite inquisitive and may spend incredibly long amounts of time exploring a new decoration over, under, around and through.

### **Leopard Geckos with other pets**

Your Leo should never interact with your other pets as it can be dangerous for all involved.

### **Final Words**

**Always remember to thoroughly wash your hands when you have finished doing anything with or for your reptile friend.**

Some information courtesy of ZooMed Laboratories and Reptifiles.