

Tegu Basic Care

Tegus are characterized by their large size, muscular limbs, spotted pattern and long, forked tongue. Depending on the species, adults grow between 0.6-1.5 m (2-5 ft) in length, including the tail, and weigh between 3.6-6.8 kg (8-15 lb).

The *Salvator* species are most commonly kept in captivity and include the Argentine black and white tegu (*Salvator merianae*) and the red tegu (*Salvator rufescens*). Argentine tegus measure up to 1.6 m (5.2 ft) and weigh up to 5 kg (11 lb). Both of these species are larger than the Colombian or Tupinambis tegus of which the most common is the Colombian black and white tegu (*Tupinambis teguixin*).

Sex determination can be difficult in young tegus, however, males tend to have much larger heads and jowls. Males also have enlarged, thickened scales on the underside of their tail base on both sides of their cloacal vent, which is missing in females. As male tegus mature, these spots can be felt as small, raised bumps. Tegus are sexually mature at 3 years of age with an average lifespan between 15-20 years. (Tupinambis tegus may live 8-12 years).

Housing

In the wild, tegus are mostly ground-dwelling, burrowing lizards.

ENCLOSURE: Hatchlings can initially do well in a 75 L (20 gallon) aquarium with a secure lid, however they will quickly outgrow this enclosure. Adult tegus require a large enclosure that allows for digging and climbing. Cage dimensions for a single adult tegu should be at minimum, 1.8 m long, 0.9 m deep, and 0.9 m tall (6 ft x 3 ft x 3 ft). Double this size when housing more than one tegu and provide a series of visual barriers.. It is not recommended to house males together as fighting may occur

SUBSTRATE: Provide a tarp or several layers of newspaper or butcher paper as an easy-to-clean base. This papered area provides an area to safely feed your tegu while preventing ingestion of bedding.

Covered the base with a deep layer (0.6 m or 2 ft) of absorbent bedding, such as topsoil, mixtures of sand, peat moss, and soil, aspen shavings, cypress or eucalyptus mulch, or orchid bark to encourage natural burrowing behavior. Burrowing material can be provided within a large plastic container for easier cleaning. Avoid wood chips, corn cob, or stone gravel bedding due to the risk of ingestion. Also avoid indoor-outdoor carpeting since it is likely to become shredded as your tegu digs creating threads that can become entangled on nails or toes.

LIGHTING: Tegus require 12-14 hours of daily UVB exposure. This should be supplemented with opportunities to bask in natural, unfiltered sunlight as often as weather permits.

HEATING: Cage temperature should range from 24°C (75°F) on the cool side to 29°C-35°C (85°F-95°F) on the warm side. The basking area temperature should reach 35°C-38°C (95°F-100°F). Provide a log or shelf beneath the basking spot to allow your tegu to get closer or farther from the heating elements. Cage temperature should not drop below 24°C (75°F) at night.

Tegus in the wild will brumate (hibernate) during the cold winter months. Unless heating in the enclosure is increased, many captive tegus will slow down and retire to their burrows for many months when temperatures dip below the low 20s°C (70s°F) beginning around mid-September.

HUMIDITY: Tegus originate from the tropical rainforests of South America and their humidity requirements are high. Relative humidity should be maintained around 80% and should be monitored with a hygrometer. A water container large enough to allow soaking will help to achieve the ideal humidity level, along with misting the enclosure with water on a daily basis. Inadequate humidity levels can lead to shedding problems.

VISUAL SECURITY: Provide a hiding place, such as a log or box, at each end of the temperature gradient. The substrate within the hide, such as mulch or sphagnum moss, should be kept slightly damp as an aid for shedding and a source of humidity.

Diet

NUTRITIONAL STRATEGY: Most tegus are omnivores, meaning they eat both plant and animal matter. These lizards are generalists, consuming a wide variety of food items in the wild. Tegus are active foragers and opportunistic hunters. They will also consume carrion when available. By flicking their long, forked tongues, tegus bring scent particles to a gland in the roof of the mouth, the vomeronasal gland or Jacobson's organ. This helps tegus process sensory information and makes them better hunters and scavengers.

DIETARY PROTEIN: Wild Argentine black and white tegus consume a wide variety of invertebrates and vertebrates, carcasses, and even eggs. Young tegus are primarily insectivorous. In captivity, offer a variety of insects, such as gut-loaded crickets, phoenix worms, cockroaches, dubia roaches, superworms, mealworms, and wax worms. Tegus often show less interest in feeder insects as they grow and can gradually be transitioned to larger prey items, such as appropriately-sized, pre-killed or frozen-thawed rodents. Feeding live rodents is not recommended due to the risk of injury to your tegu. Lean ground meat (specifically low-fat ground turkey), fish, and/or raw eggs can be offered as occasional treats. Another option for feeding adults is the "Chicken Pot Pie" Gel Food Premix (Repashy Specialty Pet Products).

PRODUCE: Offer tegus a variety of vegetables and smaller amounts of fruits, such as strawberries, melons, tomatoes, and bananas. Fruit consumption tends to increase as tegus age.

FREQUENCY: Young tegus should be fed every day. Tegus between 1-3 years old should be fed every other day and once they exceed 3 years of age, tegus can be fed every 3 days.

OBESITY: Adult tegus are prone to obesity. Monitor body weight regularly and provide sufficient time and room for exercise.

BITE PREVENTION: Tegus are often voracious feeders. All tegu species can display aggressive feeding behavior, however, Colombian tegus have a reputation for being more aggressive and are a better choice for the more experienced reptile owner. Prevent accidental bites from your hungry lizard by feeding from a bowl or with tongs. Some owners prefer to feed their tegus in a separate, paper-lined enclosure. This approach results in conditioned behavior that may decrease feeding-frenzy activity when the lizard is approached in their usual (nonfeeding) cage.

SUPPLEMENTATION: A calcium supplement without vitamin D₃ is recommended and should be sprinkled on or mixed with food at every meal. A multivitamin is also recommended to be mixed into food once weekly. Supplementation recommendations do not vary with age.

WATER: Fresh water should be available at all times, preferably in a shallow container large enough for soaking (*see humidity above*).

Behavior

Tegus are curious, extremely intelligent lizards that can be tamed and trained with regular (daily) interaction and handling, especially from an early age. This is particularly true of Argentine tegus, which tend to be more docile. As in other reptiles, tegus can harbor and shed bacteria that can cause illness in humans, such as *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, and *Campylobacter*. So, always wash your hands with soap and water after handling your tegu or its cage furniture.

See Bite Prevention above for a brief discussion on aggressive feeding behavior.

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