

Care of the Blue Tongued Skink

The blue-tongued skink (*Tiliqua* spp., *Cyclodomorphus* spp.) is a stocky, cylindrical lizard with small legs and a large head, known for its deep, vivid blue tongue. Blue-tongued (BT) skinks are mild mannered, social lizards native to the semi-desert and open woodland regions of Australia, New Guinea, and Tasmania. Depending on the species, BT skinks can reach lengths of up to 27 inches and with proper care these lizards can live for 20 years or more.

DIET

Blue-tongued skinks are omnivorous reptiles that eat a wide variety of vegetables and animal protein. As juveniles half of their diet comes from insects, whereas adults should eat proportionately more plant matter. If a commercial lizard diet is offered, provide only as a supplement. Feed skinks every one to two days.

Produce

All produce offered should be fresh, high quality items fit for human consumption and pesticide free. Finely chopped fresh greens and mixed vegetables should make up 45% to 60% of an adult skink's diet.

- Dark, leafy greens such as mustard, kale, dandelion and collard greens should make up the bulk of the vegetable mix, as they are an excellent source of calcium.
- Peas, green beans, corn, squash, carrots, sweet potato, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers and parsley can also be added.
- Adult skinks should have their salad mix coarsely chopped, while juveniles tend prefer finely chopped greens.

Fruit should make up no more than 5% to 10% of the diet. Melons, berries, apple, peaches, pears, grapes and plums may also be chopped and added to the mix as an occasional treat. Flowers—especially hibiscus, dandelions, and nasturtiums—are another highly relished treat.

Animal Protein

Skinks, particularly juveniles, will also eat a variety of prey items including crickets, mealworms, kingworms, snails and pinky mice. Waxworms should only be offered as an occasional treat, because these insects are high in fat. Low fat dog or cat food may also be offered as an occasional protein source. Do not feed lightning bugs to your skink - they are toxic.

Vitamin/Mineral Supplementation

- Lightly dust the diet with a calcium carbonate supplement (**without** phosphorus or vitamin D) just prior to feeding your adult lizard two to three times a week. Calcium

supplements should have a minimum calcium: phosphorous ratio of 2:1. Avoid products containing Vitamin D as this can lead to toxicity. A separate vitamin supplement can also be offered one to two times weekly.

- Offer “gut loaded” insects or insects fed high calcium diets for several days before being fed to your pet. This calcium-rich diet may include a commercial cricket diet (like Fluker’s cricket food), grain (such as whole oatmeal, bran) or a high protein baby cereal mixed with reptile vitamins, and/or dark leafy greens. Cat or dog food may also be used however this probably adds more fat to your dragon’s diet than it needs.
- Offer a reptile multi-vitamin approximately once weekly.

Water

Your skink will need fresh water daily. Water should be in a dish shallow enough for your lizard to easily access.

HOUSING

BT skinks require large enclosures. Since these lizards are not good climbers, more horizontal space is preferred. At minimum, house the adult skink in a 55-gallon vivarium, although larger is better. The enclosure must be well ventilated, yet able to retain heat. The top must be sturdy enough to hold heating and lighting elements, and composed of a screen type mesh.

Always house BT skinks separately since they can be very aggressive to each.

Cage substrate:

- Newspaper, butcher paper, and reptile carpeting (i.e. Astroturf) are inexpensive, readily available, and easy to change.
- Reptile bark and non-aromatic mulch are moderately absorbent and provide a burrowing material, however these products trap moisture and must be changed frequently to prevent overgrowth of bacteria and fungi.
- Avoid sand, gravel or corncob bedding because they may cause gastrointestinal blockage if ingested. Corncob, moss and alfalfa pellets are also prone to hold moisture and promote bacterial growth. Wood shavings such as pine and cedar can predispose to skin and respiratory infections.

Change newspaper every couple of days. Wash reptile carpet every couple of days, and keep multiple pieces since the carpet must be completely dry when placed in the enclosure. Completely change bark or mulch monthly; spot cleanings should be performed regularly near the water dish and in latrine areas.

Heat

Proper temperature is very important. During the day, cage temperature should range from 75°F (24°C) on the cool side of the tank to 88°F (31°C) on the warm side. The basking area should range from 90-95°F (32-35°C).

- An under tank heating unit with a heat lamp works well in the basking area to achieve the correct temperature gradient.
- Avoid electric “hot rocks” since these items may short circuit causing serious burns.
- Place thermometers at both ends of the cage.

Lighting

Ultraviolet light is needed for normal absorption of dietary calcium.

- Provide a synthetic ultraviolet light source for your bearded dragon. Be sure to choose a bulb specifically designed for reptile use that emits light in the UVB range of 290-320 nm.
- Ultraviolet rays are filtered by glass and plastic therefore natural light and artificial light must not pass through glass or plastic.
- The UVB spectrum generally degrades after about 6 months; therefore bulbs should be replaced every 6 months.

Consider exposing your pet to direct sunlight when outside temperatures exceed 75-80°F (24-27°C). Keep your dragon in a wire or screened enclosure that provides a shaded area. Monitor your pet closely since overheating is a danger in the hot summer sun.

Cage furniture

The tank should be large enough to provide a hiding place at both ends.

- Large slabs of rounded cork bark make excellent hiding areas.
- Skinks seem to like cylindrical hiding areas so cardboard mailing tubes or PVC pipes should also be provided.
- If you are going to include plant life as part of your vivarium remember that a much larger enclosure is required. Ponytail palms (*Beaucarnea recurvata*), snake plants (*Sansevieria* spp.), as well as jade plants (*Crassula argentea*) are all suitable.

HANDLING & RESTRAINT

Blue-tongued skinks can be tamed with frequent, gentle handling. Like most lizards, BT skinks are usually more wary of fast movements or being approach from above. So move slowly and approach your skin from the side.

Lift your skink by gently encircling its body near the forelegs with your fingers. Support its body with your free hand. Skinks can be very trusting and don't have the legs to hold on as well as other lizards, so always take care to support them. Although skinks may be content to be held for long periods of time, do not keep them out of their cage long as they cannot keep themselves warm at room temperature.

Note: Do not grasp your skink by the tail. The tail can break off and does not regenerate well.