



# Giant Green Iguana Information & Care

Melissa Kaplan  
www.Anapsid.org

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Green iguanas are not easy-to-care-for lizards, and they are not easy to tame. When you decide to get an iguana, you are committing yourself to a year of taming and socializing a rapidly growing, and increasingly independent-minded, lizard and to the next 10-15+ years of your life being devoted to the needs and whims of a large, intelligent lizard who can read you better than you can read him. Iguanas are not suitable for children. Parents who allow their children to get iguanas must understand that *they* are the primary caretaker and financial supporter, not the child. Iguanas take daily care, increasingly larger tropical environments, special lighting, fresh food, and regular veterinary care. Iguanas are not inexpensive to buy (when you factor in all the equipment you need to start) nor to keep. Still think you want an iguana? Then read on...

## **Basic Facts**

**Size at hatching:** 2.5" svl      At one year: 10-12" svl      At 5 years: 18"+ svl  
**Overall size** is 2-3 x the svl. Weight from 90-100 grams at hatching, to 15-18+ pounds at maturity.

**Iguana enclosures** must be 1.5 x stl in width, .5-1 x stl in total length, and 1 x stl (or minimum of 6 ft) in height. In other words, nothing smaller than a 50 gallon tank to start, and minimum 8 ft x 3 ft x 6 ft enclosure by 3-4 years of age, or you will be building new enclosures annually for the first 5 years or so.

**Annual breeding season** starts once sexual maturity is attained around 18 months of age. Males tend to become aggressive, with some attacking human females to mate with and competing with human males for territory and breeding rights. Female iguanas can develop and lay eggs without being mated; egg-binding, often leading to death, is too common, due mostly to poor diet, inability to exercise (kept in too small an enclosure), stress (not being able to find the right place to lay eggs) or metabolic bone disease (calcium deficiency). Females can be spayed; neutering males after they reach sexually maturity does not change their behavior.

**Iguanas are sexually dimorphic.** Females are generally smaller in length and mass, and have slimmer heads and wider abdomens than males. Iguanas cannot be sexed visually until they are about 1 year of age. At that time, the male femoral pores will enlarge; on females, only the first 4-5 pores will. Over time, males develop large jowls around their subtympenic scale.

**Iguanas are herbivores, not omnivores.** Never feed animal protein (insects, mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, or reptiles) nor pet food for any of these types of animals. The only acceptable commercial iguana food is Zoo Med's alfalfa-based iguana diet IF used as part of a fresh food diet. Food containing large amounts of corn, soy, and grains cause health problems, malnutrition, and nutritional disorders. Not all vegetables are created equal; read the diet section below, and shop or plant accordingly.

## **Minimum Equipment and Supplies for New Iguana**

Rectangular-shaped enclosure big enough to grow into, preferably with a front rather than top door. Daytime heat light (household incandescent bulb), human heating pad (no hot rocks!), nocturnal reptile light, UVB-producing fluorescent (Durotest's Vita-Lite, Zoo Med's Iguana or Reptile Light). Linoleum, "Astroturf" or paper towels for substrate (never litters, shavings, or other particulate matter, even if there are lizards on the packaging!), 3 thermometers, hide box, log or other elevated basking area, appliance timer, power strip for extra outlets, claw trimmers, blood-stop powder, separate cleaning

supplies, safe disinfectant (such as Nolvasan), multivitamin (such as Centrum), calcium carbonate, povidone-iodine, triple antibiotic ointment, spare towels, animal carrier, and reptile veterinarian.

### **Temperature and Lighting Requirements**

**Daytime:** cool side of tank 75 F, warm side of tank 85 F, basking area 88-95 F. Digestion doesn't start till temps are 88 F, but the iguana needs the 75-88 range to thermoregulate. **UVB-Fluorescent** must be on during daytime hours. Daylight and UVB lights on for 10-12 hours a day, going on between 6-7 a.m. **Nighttime:** up to one year: cool side of tank 73 F, warm side 85 F; after one year, cool side can go down to 70 F, warm side no lower than 80 F. **No white lights at night!** Important: provide both vertical and horizontal thermal gradients (warm to cool).

### **Food and Feeding**

**Iguanas are herbivores** - they eat leaves, with some fruit and flowers, in the wild. In captivity, construct a fresh greens, vegetable and fruit diet to provide the plant protein, carbohydrates, high fiber and low fat diet they need, supplemented as necessary to ensure they have enough calcium to promote strong bones and systemic functioning. Feed by mid-morning. Late afternoon snacks are fine but their main food intake should be mid-morning to mid-afternoon. Please see my website for more extensive information. A good **basic diet** to start:

½ c. shredded, raw green beans, snap peas, snow peas

½ c. shredded, peeled, raw squash (not zucchini)

½ c. shredded raw parsnip or asparagus

½ c. alfalfa pellets OR 2 tablespoons alfalfa powder (human health food product)

¼ c. finely chopped strawberries, seeded pear, or peeled and seeded cantaloupe, mango, or papaya

**Shred into small pieces for hatchlings and adults** - the iguana can fit more into his gut where it will be more thoroughly digested. Combine all together, mixing well (to prevent iguana from picking through it). Supplement with pinch of multivitamin 2 x week, pinch of extra calcium 4 x week. If you freeze the food, add pinch of thiamin (B1) to defrosted salad before serving. **Serve** salad along with a pile of mixed leafy greens (collards, mustard, dandelion, escarole, occasionally chard, kale). **Treats** can include banana and other fruits, nasturtium, geranium, and hibiscus flowers and leaves, grape leaves (not ivy). **Serve** daily in the morning; if ig eats only greens, give salad only until he eats it all, then serve salad in the morning and greens in the afternoon, or serve together in the morning.

### **Taming and Socialization**

Iguanas are not naturally tame. Once you get them home and house and feed them properly, they are likely to be more active - and unpleasantly so - than when you held them at the pet store. Whipping, thrashing, rolling, open-mouth threats, and scratching are normal behavior. Once the iguana has settled in for a few days and has started eating, begin handling him. Do not back off when you go to pick him up: if you back off, he will know that his attempts to make you go away worked. Keep at it, approaching him from the sides - not the top (as does an aerial predator). Keep at it, holding him for increasing periods of time several times a day. The more time you spend holding him, talking to him, and having him with you while you do various activities around the house, will ultimately make him more comfortable with you and interested in his surroundings. Iguana-proof a room and start letting him explore on his own. Set up a basking area for him near a window so he can watch you and look outside.

### **Mini-Glossary**

**gravid** pregnant - iguanas are egg-layers, going into season once a year; **parietal eye** lens on top of the head used in thermoregulating, also triggers hormone changes leading to breeding season; **snout** the area in the front of the face encompassing nostrils and mouth, also called rostrum; **svl** snout-vent length - length from snout to vent; **stl** snout-tail length - length from snout to tail-tip; **subtympenic scale** the large decorative scale below the opalescent ear drum (**tympenum**); **thermoregulate** moving between warmer and cooler temperatures to regulate core body temperature to ensure proper metabolic function and digestion; **vent** through which they defecate, mate and lay eggs.