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Tarantula General Husbandry

Housing

- "Rule of thumb: A happy tarantula is one you can't see." (British Tarantula Society)
- To house your tarantula, a plastic or glass terrarium is a good choice. A lid that allows for ventilation should be used because tarantulas can easily climb the glass or plastic walls. Arboreal (tree-living) tarantulas require tall terrariums with a few structures, such as branches, in which they can build their tube web homes. For terrestrial (land-dwelling), burrowing species, the terrarium should not be tall. Terrestrial tarantulas are fragile and can injure themselves by falling from the side or lid of a tall enclosure. The best substrates are vermiculite, peat, and coconut fiber, all of which help to maintain humidity and allow for the expression of burrowing behavior. Vermiculite provides the added advantage of keeping down bacterial and fungal growth. Burrowing species require a deep substrate. All tarantulas should be provided with a retreat that is dark inside and has an opening just large enough for the tarantula to fit through.

Climate Control

Tarantulas must be provided with species-appropriate humidity. Humidity levels range from 60% (Chilean rose, Mexican red knee) to 80% to 90% (Pink toe). Humidity can be maintained by placing a water bowl in the terrarium with a rock in it to prevent crickets from drowning and fouling the water. The substrate and walls of the enclosure can be sprayed with a mister to further increase the humidity. A hygrometer should be used to monitor humidity levels. Too little humidity can lead to dehydration of the tarantula, and too much humidity can result in fungal infection. If possible, a humidity gradient should be established, so the spider can choose the humidity level to which it is best suited. The terrarium must be ventilated to prevent the growth of bacteria and fungi. However, too much ventilation will allow the habitat to dry out. The hygrometer can help you to establish a "happy medium." Most tarantulas require temperatures that range from 75°F to 86°F. However, this too is species dependent. Many heating devices-heating pads, heating lamps, etc. -are available. A thermometer should be kept in the terrarium to monitor the temperature. Too much heat, like too little humidity, can cause lethal dehydration of your spider. The terrarium should be kept away from direct sunlight. Artificial light is not necessary because tarantulas are nocturnal.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic
Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Diet

Tarantulas are carnivores that eat live prey. Insects purchased from pet stores (crickets, mealworms, super worms) are most suitable. Some wild-caught insects, such as fireflies, can be toxic. Larger spiders can eat neonatal mice (pinkies). Commercially raised mice are often treated with antiparasitic agents that are toxic for tarantulas. The size of the prey must be appropriate for your particular animal. Prey that is too large can lead to injury of your spider. A medium-sized tarantula usually can consume two to four crickets per week. However, a healthy tarantula can go for a month without eating. Some tarantulas eat dead food such as small pieces of raw beef. However, many spiders are stimulated to eat by the movement of live prey and will not recognize the meat as food. Fresh water should always be available.

Handling

For your safety and for the health of your tarantula, handling is strongly discouraged. Although most tarantula bites are not dangerous (except for those who are allergic to their venom), the fangs can deliver a painful puncture wound. Also, a few species, such as the Cobalt Blue tarantula and the Starburst Baboon tarantula, have relatively potent venom. Other tarantulas have urticating hairs that are released or thrown as a defense. These hairs not only irritate exposed skin, they also can be the cause of severe eye injury. Handling is a common cause of serious injury or death of the tarantula. A fall can lead to life-threatening carapace fractures. When you are moving your tarantula from one enclosure to another, he should be prodded carefully into a capture cup (such as a small plastic tank or a large glass jar) with a stick or long forceps and gently released into the new enclosure.

Moulting

The frequency of moulting depends on species, sex, age, and availability of food. Young spiders and well-fed spiders moult more frequently. Males no longer moult when they reach sexual maturity. As your spider approaches its moult, you may notice darkening of the cuticle or loss of hair on the back of the abdomen. Your tarantula will stop eating. Just before moulting, your pet will prepare a bed of silk in its burrow. It then will lie on its back and gradually wriggle out of the old cuticle. The actual moult can take several hours. Your tarantula may not resume eating for up to 2 weeks after moulting. Proper humidity is essential for successful moulting. If the humidity is too low (<65%), the risk of incomplete moulting is significant, and this can result in death. Limbs can be lost during incomplete moulting, but they will regrow in future moults.

Lifespan

The life expectancy of a tarantula can be up to 20 years, depending on the species and the sex.

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