

Burmese Python

Care In Captivity

THINK!!!

Do you really want a snake that will grow more than 20 feet long or weigh over 200 pounds, urinate and defecate like a horse, will live more than 25 years and for whom you will have to kill mice, rats and, eventually, rabbits and chickens? Many people think that when they decide they don't want their Burmese any more--when it gets to be 8 or 10 or 15 feet long--it will be easy to find someone who does. Take a look at the animal classifieds - they always have sale ads for big pythons. The zoo doesn't want any more - they already have one or more giant snakes. The local herpetology societies and reptile veterinarians always have big pythons for whom they are trying to find homes. At 10 feet and 40+ pounds, a 3-year old Burmese is already eating rabbits a couple of times a month and is very difficult to handle alone. You have to interact with them constantly to keep them tame - do you want a hungry, cranky 100 pound, 12 foot snake mistaking **your** face for prey? Who is going to help you clean its enclosure? take it to the vet when it's sick? take care of it when you go away to school or on vacation? No matter how much they love you, there are **some** things a mother, and your friends, will not do! **Owning a giant snake is not cool - it is a major, long-term, frequently very expensive responsibility.**

NATURAL HISTORY

The Burmese python (*Python molurus bivittatus*) is native throughout Southeast Asia including Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, southern China, and Indonesia. While Burmese are being captive bred in the U.S. and Europe, native populations are considered to be "threatened" and are listed on Appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species). All the giant pythons (including the Indian, African Rock and Reticulated pythons) have historically been slaughtered to supply the international fashion industry with exotic skins. The exportation of young snakes for the pet trade and for their blood and gall as used in folk medicine has put additional pressures on the wild populations that cannot be sustained. If you must buy a Burmese, buy a captive-born animal.

These diurnal rainforest dwellers range from areas of lush vegetation lining the river banks up to the montane forests. Equally at home on the ground and in trees, they are also excellent swimmers, and always enjoy a nice, long soak in warm water, especially just before they are ready to shed. Like all diurnal snakes, Burmese spend the morning hours soaking up the sun's warmth to enable them to begin moving around to look for food. In the wild, snakes do not eat every day, and are not always successful in capturing every prey animal at whom they strike. (Captive snake owners generally do not understand this and so it is all too common to see obese snakes in captivity.) If they are lucky enough to eat, they spend the rest of the afternoon, and the next several days or weeks, keeping warm enough to digest their meal.

Burmese breed in the early spring. Females lay their eggs in March or April; their clutches range from 12-36 eggs. Females encircle their eggs, remaining with them from the time they are laid until they hatch; during this time, they will not leave the eggs and will not eat. While incubating, the females muscles twitch; these tremors

apparently enable the female to raise the ambient temperature around the eggs several degrees. Once the hatchlings cut their way out of their eggs, they are on their own.

Burmese pythons, like all pythons and boas, devour a variety of prey in the wild - amphibians, lizards, other snakes, birds and mammals. In captivity, they should be fed pre-killed mice, rats, rabbits and chickens. You can buy the prey at pet stores and from private breeders and suppliers to the herp trade; these animals have been specially raised and are clean, healthy and well-nourished, and you can always find a source who uses humane methods of euthanasia. Chickens can be purchased at hatcheries. *Under no circumstances should you feed your snakes wild-caught prey items.* Wild rodents and other animals carry a variety of parasites and bacteria for which your snakes have no immunity. If you cannot afford to buy the proper food, you should not buy the snake.

Selecting Your Burmese Python

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, a rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes and that actively flicks its tongue around when handled. When held, the snake should grip you gently but firmly when moving around. It should be alert to its surroundings. All young snakes are food for other, larger snakes, birds, lizards and mammalian predators so your hatchling may be a bit nervous at first but should settle down quickly. Like all pythons and boas, Burmese have anal spurs. These single claws appearing on either side of the vent are the vestigial remains of the hind legs snakes lost during their evolution from lizard to snake millions of years ago. Males have longer spurs than do the females, and have tails that are wider at the base (tail-end of the vent); otherwise, there is little difference in temperament between the two sexes.

GETTING STARTED

Build or purchase a strong snake-proof enclosure. Select an enclosure especially designed for housing snakes, such as the Critter Cottages with the combination fixed screen/hinged glass top. All snakes are escape artists; Burmese are especially powerful when it comes to breaking out. A good starter tank for a hatchling is a 55 gallon tank. After the first couple of years, you will have to build your own enclosure out of wood and glass or plexiglass. Some people partition off a large part of a room or convert a walk-in closet into a suitable Burmese "tank". Be prepared - giant snakes need lots of room, not the least of which is room enough for you to get in there and clean it out! Remember that your snake will grow rapidly, even when fed conservatively, so you must always buy or build an enclosure much bigger than the present size of your Burmese.

Suitable substrate

Use paper towels, butcher paper or unprinted newsprint at first. These are easily and quickly removed and replaced when soiled and will allow you to better monitor for the presence of mites and the condition of the feces. Once the animal is established, you can use decorative ground cover such as commercially prepared shredded cypress or fir bark; do not use orchid bark. Pine, cedar and redwood shavings should not be used as they can become lodged in the mouth while eating, and due to the oils, may cause respiratory infections and other problems. The shavings must be monitored closely and all soiled and wet shavings pulled out immediately to prevent bacteria and fungus growths. The utilitarian approach is to use inexpensive AstroTurf

and linoleum. Extra pieces of Astroturf can be kept in reserve and used when the soiled piece is removed for cleaning and drying (soak in one part bleach to 30 parts water; rinse thoroughly, and dry *completely* before reuse). Remember: the easier it is to clean, the faster you'll do it! Linoleum is easy to clean and disinfect and, when used on the floor and a couple of inches up the walls of wooden enclosures, will help preserve the wood from the acidic urates.

A hiding place should be provided for Burmese pythons. A half-log (available at pet stores), an empty cardboard box or upside-down opaque plastic container, the latter two with an access doorway cut into one end, can also be used. The plastic is easily cleaned when necessary; the box can be tossed out when soiled and replaced with a new one. Once your snake outgrows these easily replaced hide boxes, you will need to use your imagination. Eventually, you can use a large kitty-litter pan or suitably modified garbage can. Once the snake reaches ten feet, you will have to put your imagination (or hammer and nails and wood) to work to devise increasingly larger enclosures.

Proper temperature range is essential to keeping your snake healthy. The ambient air temperature throughout the enclosure must be maintained between 85-88F during the day, with a basking area kept at 90F. At night, the ambient air temperature may be allowed to drop down no lower than 78-80F. Special reptile heating pads that are manufactured to maintain a temperature about 20F higher than the air temperature may be used inside the enclosure. There are adhesive pads that can be stuck to the underside of a glass enclosure (unfortunately, when the time comes to move your snake to a larger tank, the heating pad cannot easily be removed from the old tank and reused). Heating pads made for people, found at all drug stores and supermarkets, are also available; these have built-in high-medium-low switches and can be used under or inside a glass or wood enclosure. You can also use incandescent light bulbs in porcelain and metal reflector hoods to provide the additional heat required for the basking area. *All lights* must be screened off to prevent the snake from burning itself, and bright lights must be turned off at least 12-14 hours a day to mimic a proper photoperiod; if kept under lights all the time, the snakes will stress and may become ill. If the proper temperatures cannot be maintained without the incandescent light, then you must use another source of non-light emitting or dim light emitting heat. All pythons are very susceptible to thermal burns and for this reason a hot rock must not be used. Buy at least two thermometers: one to use 1" above the enclosure floor in the cooler side, and the other 1" above the floor in the basking area. Don't try to guess the temperature. You will end up with a snake who will be too cold to eat and digest its food. Once your snake is bigger, invest in a pig blanket, a large rigid pad for which you can buy a thermostat to better control the temperature.

No special lighting is needed. You may use a full-spectrum light or low wattage incandescent bulb in the enclosure during the day but snakes do not require full-spectrum light. Make sure the snake cannot get into direct contact with the light bulbs. If they climb into the fluorescent tube fixture, they may pop out and break the bulb--an expensive and potentially lethal accident.

Feeding

Allow your snake to acclimate for a week or two to its new home. Start your hatchling (about 22" in length) off with a single pre-killed week to 10-day old "fuzzy" rat. A smaller sized hatchling may require a small mouse. Older Burmese may be fed

larger pre-killed rats. The rule of thumb is that you can feed prey items that are no wider than the widest part of the snake's body. While Burmese (most of whom are bottomless pits when it comes to putting down food) will often gladly eat prey that is too large for their size, they will generally regurgitate the prey item one or more days later--not a pretty sight. If you have not had any experience force feeding a snake, you may not want to try it yourself until you have seen someone do it. It is very easy to overfeed Burmese as most of them are always eager for food, whether they need it or not. Be judicious--you will end up with a giant snake soon enough. Just feed enough to keep it healthy, not obese.

Provide a bowl of fresh water at all times; your snake will both drink, soak and may defecate in it. Check it and replace with fresh water as necessary.

Routine veterinary screening for newly acquired snakes is essential. Many of the parasites infesting Burmese and other reptiles can be transmitted to humans and other reptiles. Left untreated, such infestations can ultimately kill your snake. When your snake first defecates, collect the feces in a clean plastic bag, seal it, label it with the date, your name and phone number and the snake's name, and take it and your snake to a vet who is experienced with reptiles. There it will be tested for parasites (which the majority of pet trade reptiles have) and the proper medication given.

Handling your new snake

After giving your Burmese a couple of days to settle in, begin picking it up and handling it gently. It may try to move away from you and may threaten you by twitching its tail and hissing. Be gentle but persistent. Daily contact will begin to establish a level of trust and confidence between you and your snake. When it is comfortable with you, you can begin taking it around the house. Don't get over-confident! Given a chance and close proximity to seat cushions, your Burm will make a run (well, a slither) for it, easing down between the cushions and from there, to points possibly unknown. Always be gentle and try to avoid sudden movements. If the snake wraps around your arm or neck, you can unwind it by gently unwrapping it starting at the tail end, not the head.

Necessities

Some things you should have on hand for general maintenance and first aid include: *Nolvasan(TM)* (_chlorhexidine diacetate_) for cleaning enclosures and disinfecting food and water bowls, litter boxes, tubs and sinks etc. *Betadine(TM)* (_povidone/iodine_) for cleansing scratches and wounds. Set aside feeding and water bowls, and a soaking bowl or tub for the sole use of your snake.

BAD PRESS - AND OFTEN DESERVEDLY SO!

Giant pythons have been in the press quite a bit lately, all due to the fact that their owners died as a result of improper handling of their snakes. While admittedly the press sensationalizes in order to better sell papers, the fact of the matter is that not only is there still a great deal of morbid fear on the part of the general public as regards snakes in general, and giant pythons in particular, but there is also a great deal of stupidity being displayed by many giant python owners (such as by those owners who are surprised to find that their ten foot snake left their backyard to go exploring the neighborhood when left outside for a bit of sun). And for every story that the press "neglects" to correct, such as the man who actually suffered a fatal heart attack while watching TV with his python, rather than being killed by it, the

press also fails to point out what was being done improperly by the snake owner at the time of the "attack." If you smell like food to a snake, especially some of the giant pythons who seemingly contain a bottomless pit instead of a finite stomach, you will be grabbed. And since most people's reaction when being grabbed by a mouth full of fangs in a head the size of a cantaloupe is to flinch and draw away, the snake, sensing live "prey," does what a snake ought to do--bite harder to retain a good grip on the "prey" (hopefully your arm and NOT your face) and coil and constrict around it to begin the process of suffocation. In the case of the unfortunate Canadian snake owner who was killed, his python was not very big, but a) the owner was highly intoxicated at the time, b) the snake was in shed and its eyes were fully opaque and c) the snake was known to be temperamental in general. So not only was the snake feeling particularly cranky and intolerable of human interaction, its human was too intoxicated to act, and react, appropriately. According to one hospital emergency room physician who has made a study of snake bites, he found that the majority of bites happen to young adult males (late teens through mid-twenties) who are intoxicated at the time of the "attack." On the flip side, though, is the unfortunate Colorado family whose young teenage son was napping when he was attacked and killed by the family's eight foot pet Burmese, a snake who had been free-roaming in the house ever since it was brought home as a hatchling. While it is true that you are more likely to die in an automobile accident, it is also true that in the past year alone, the number of deaths attributed to and actually caused by pet pythons has more than tripled. As a direct result of the irresponsible actions of these python owners, cities and states are enacting ordinances and legislation banning or severely restricting the private ownership of large pythons - in many cases any snake of any species which reaches 6 or more feet in length.

BEFORE YOU BUY...

Go to a zoo that has an adult specimen. Check out your local herpetological societies to find other giant python owners and ask if you can be allowed to visit their snake, and, if possible, handle it. Few pet stores actually have full-grown adult specimens.

Check out your city, county and state laws to see if there are any restrictions on owning a giant python or boa. Cities who have experienced terror because someone let their Burmese get out of the house have been passing increasingly stringent regulations prohibiting, or severely governing, the ownership or possession of large snakes.

If you have small children, or children will have access to the room in which the snake will be kept, ask yourself whether you can properly secure the snake so that, not only is there no chance for it to escape, but there is no way for young fingers to undo the cage.

Remember that regardless of how tame your Burmese becomes, and no matter how long you have had it, it is still a wild animal and as such is to be considered unpredictable and potentially dangerous.

BOOKS

Check your local pet stores and library for these and other python and reptile care books:

The General Care and Maintenance of Burmese Pythons, by Philippe de Vosjoli. 1990.

Advanced Vivarium Systems, Lakeside CA.

The Completely Illustrated Atlas of Reptiles and Amphibians, by Obst, Richter and Jacob. 1988. TFH Publications, Inc. Neptune City, NJ.

Snakes of the World, by Scott Weidensaul. 1991. Chartwell Books, Seacacus, NJ.

Living Snakes of the World, John M. Mehrtens. 1987. Sterling Publishing Co. New York.