

Tarantulas, General Care and Maintenance

by Alan Kerslake

Why keep tarantulas? Well, one reason could be, to overcome the fear of spiders! That was the reason why I first kept one, a Chilean Rose (*Grammostola spatulata*).

A guy came to our reptile club to give us a demonstration of what it was like to keep Tarantulas, and he brought along about a dozen of these big hairy spiders. Well, seeing as how I was arachnophobic up until that point, I was not taken with them right away. In fact I told a mate there, "I wouldn't want to keep them, would you?" He agreed with me, we would rather keep snakes, which we both did.

Having returned home, I got to thinking about my irrational fear of spiders and decided to find out more about them, so I bought a small handbook on tarantulas, this kindled my interest and soon I had decided to pluck up my courage and buy one. At first I was scared to go near it, but eventually, by constantly being exposed to this one, I soon lost my fear of it and became fascinated by it instead and soon my collection grew until I had over thirty. Thirty six to be exact.

If you look at my web site, www.geocities.com/alansnake1, you will find a list of the ones I keep and have kept; along with some pictures.

Well that's why I keep them. Others keep them to study them scientifically, these, like others who keep them to breed are called Arachnoculturalists.

Housing and Maintenance.

All you need is a fairly small container, and lots of different ones have been used, jars, large bottles, small fish tanks. But what I use mostly are "Pet Pals", you can see a number of these on my web site along with some different containers. "Pet Pals" come in different sizes, they are relatively cheap to buy, they have a perforated lid for air flow and are easy to clean. Put only one spider in each tank, they are cannibalistic. To heat the tank, place a heat mat behind the tank, or in the case of several on a shelf, a heat strip behind the tanks. To throw heat into the tank, place polystyrene behind the strip, but leave a gap where the lead joins the pad. It is important not to over heat. This pad or strip should be linked up to a thermostat to ensure that it doesn't get too hot.

Then you need some substrate. Again there are different views on what is best. Some use peat, others use sand and peat mix, others just use vermiculite, and yet again, some mix vermiculite and peat together with some sand. I prefer to use just vermiculite. If you use just peat or even a mixture of peat, there is a heightened chance of getting mould or mites. There is less chance of either with just vermiculite. You can get this from gardening stores. With this substrate you can easily see the discarded remains of the spiders food, so that you can remove it, and it is important to do this each day to ensure you don't get mite infestation. Mites live on the discarded carcasses and remains of crickets which are the food you will be feeding them, so you must remove any that you see. You will see this as a small brown ball left in one corner of the tank. To aid the removal of this, a long pair of tongs would be handy.

Feeding.

The spider eats by quickly killing the cricket, (and this is so fast, it leaves snakes looking like slow-coaches, so I don't believe the cricket has time to know what has happened and doesn't suffer.) and then sucking the body fluids from the cricket, this leaves a dry ball of remains.

I put one cricket into the tank each day and watch to see if the spider eats it, if it does, I put in another. Also it is a good idea to put a small cap of food in the tank for the cricket to eat. A milk bottle cap will do. I put in a small cap of oats, or fish food. It is possible for a cricket to kill a tarantula after the tarantula has shed its skin, if the cricket is hungry.

One other essential is a water bowl. Cut the bottom off a plastic bottle and there you have one. Sink it into the substrate for a little way, and keep it topped up. Put a sliver of slate or tile into the bowl to give the cricket a chance to climb out if it gets in the water.

Heat and Humidity.

Heat and humidity varies with different tarantulas, those from the rainforest generally need more humidity than those from the desert regions, so it would be a good idea to get a good book on tarantulas and I will recommend some later.

As a general idea of how much you should spray, and heat, I would say keep it around 25c, 80f and spray the Arboreals (those that live in the trees of the rain forest) twice a week, if you are using a peat mix, and every day if a vermiculite base is used. And for all of the Terrestrials, (ground dwellers) just top up the water bowl and spill a little in to the base twice a week should be enough to ensure success in keeping them. If you want to breed, which is outside the limits of this care sheet, then you need to be more accurate, and that is where a good book comes in.

Shedding.

Yes, that's right. Tarantulas have an exoskeleton which they shed from time to time just like a snake. When this happens for the first time, it can be a bit scary for the keeper. It appears that the spider has died. It will be on its back and quite still, what ever you do, don't touch it. Leave it alone and it will eventually split the skin along the side of its abdomen and will climb out. At this time it is very vulnerable. Its fangs are white instead of black and are soft, so it cannot defend itself so remove any crickets. In a week it will be back to normal and you can feed it again. Spray more often when the shedding is likely. Sometimes a tarantula will shed standing up or on its side, but this is rare, I have only seen it once.

Recommended first tarantulas.

Chilean Rose - this is variously named as *Grammostola spatulata*, *Grammostola cala* or *Grammostola rosea*

Curly Hair - *Brachypelma albopilosa*

Red Knee - *Brachypelma smithii*.

Red Rump - *Brachypelma vagans*.

These four are easily handled and are generally docile, but remember, all tarantulas are venomous, but generally no more dangerous than a bee sting. But it is recommended that no children be allowed to handle them. Even adults that have an allergy to them could find themselves in trouble if bitten, and we don't know the level of venom in all tarantulas, especially those from the Old World.

I wouldn't handle any of the Old World tarantulas, those from India, Sri Lanka, Africa, etc. They are more aggressive and ready to bite. The New World tarantulas, those from the Americas, are more likely to kick their urticating hairs from their abdomen towards your eyes and nose, this can be very irritating and even can cause temporary blindness. Having said all this I don't want to worry you unduly. I have never been bitten and never had any trouble from the hairs. Because of the habit that the New World tarantulas have of kicking hairs, you will often see them with a bald abdomen, when this starts to become dark, you will know that the tarantula is about to shed its exoskeleton.

Tarantulas for the more experienced.

Once you have been keeping tarantulas for a while you may feel the need to get some more difficult to keep tarantulas. They are only more difficult in as much as, you should not handle them, they are more aggressive.

Goliath Bird-eater - *Theraphosa blondi*.

This is the biggest of the tarantulas and can grow with a leg span of 12 inches

Indian Ornamental - *Poecilotheria regalis*.

Another aggressive spider that is quite big and beautifully coloured, an arboreal spider.

King Baboon - *Citharischius crawshayi*.

The biggest of the African spiders. Orange in colour and aggressive.

Pink Toed - *Avicularia avicularia*.

An arboreal tarantula, docile and can be kept in colonies, if they have plenty of room to avoid one another.

Trinidad Chevron - *Psalmopoeus cambridgei*.

Again, one not to be handled, fast and aggressive. An Arboreal spider.



The Picture is of a Salmon Pink (*Lasiodora parahibana*).

The second largest tarantula in the world. Handling is not encouraged.

The front part of the body is the Cephalothorax, the rear end is the abdomen. This is very fragile and if a Tarantula drops from only small height, it can rupture the abdomen and die, so care must be taken with handling. The hard shell-like part of the upper body is the Carapace. All spiders have eight legs, but there are two at the front that look like short legs, but are not, these are the Pedipalps, which aid it in eating.

Right at the front of the head, (which by the way has eight eyes) are the Chelicerae, or fangs, these are sheathed in hair. The fangs of a tarantula strike down like daggers, whereas, the fangs of other spiders cut across like curved scissors. The legs are divided in five parts starting at the bottom we have the Tarsus, Metatarsus, Tibia, Patella, and Femur.

Once a male is mature it will have small spurs on the inside of the Tibia known as Tibial Spurs. The male uses these spurs when mating to hold the fangs of the female tarantula so that she can't harm him, then quickly lets go and does a rear retreat. Males only live on average a year after maturing, whereas, a female can easily live 20 years or more. Doesn't seem fair, does it guys? Once the male matures it will change its appearance completely. It will become more gangly, with longer legs and smaller abdomen.

Recommended books

I can't too strongly recommend that you get "The Tarantula Keepers Guide" by Stanly A. Schultz and Marguerita J. Schultz. Published by Barron's. This is the Tarantula Keeper's bible.

Another useful booklet, that also covers the keeping of scorpions, is "Arachnomania" by Philippe de Vosjoli. Published by Advanced Vivarium Systems. Lots of idea in this small book.

Another small but educational book is "Tarantulas, Their Captive Husbandry and Reproduction", by Jon Coote. Published by Practical Python Publications.

"Keeping and Breeding Tarantulas" by Ronald N. Baxter is an excellent book with lots of coloured pictures of tarantulas. Published by Chudleigh Publishing.

If you are serious about keeping Tarantula then I would say it's a must that you join the British Tarantula Society. They have a web site at <http://www.thebts.co.uk/> and a very good quarterly magazine and they have a show each year where members buy and sell their spiders and meet one another.

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