

AN INSEKTUS GUIDE TO KEEPING YOUR BIRD EATING SPIDER HEALTHY

Updated May 2004, from the American Tarantula Society Forum (1993) By: Dr. Fred Sherberger. Edited by S J Fellenberg.



INTRODUCTION

Of the approximately 35,000 known species of spiders, some 800 or so are known as true tarantulas and are placed in the family Theraphosidae. They are mostly heavy-bodied, and have eight eyes on a small "bump" at the front of the body. In North America, tarantulas are found mostly in drier areas, from Arkansas westward. In Australia, they are found right across the top end, from Qld to Western Australia. All tarantulas are venomous, and all can bite, although only a very few cause more than a localized "bee sting" reaction.

PET STORE TARANTULAS

The Chilean rose, *Grammostola rosea*, is a hardy ground-dweller from drier areas of northern Chile, and has been available in overseas stores for several years. As our hobby increases in popularity more and more species are entering the pet trade, and specialty dealers may offer dozens of kinds of tarantulas. **All overseas species are illegal in Australia.**

KEEPING YOUR BIRD EATING SPIDER HEALTHY

Maintaining a healthy tarantula means providing: 1) a secure, escape-proof cage, 2) proper food, 3) enough water, and 4) a proper environment.

HOUSING

Almost any kind of container can be used to house your tarantula - an aquarium, or small retile enclosure will provide a great home for a young tarantula. Tarantulas are excellent climbers and, no matter what kind of cage you use, a secure top is a must. These will both keep the spider in and help keep poking fingers and other potentially harmful harassment out. Several small air holes in the top and/or sides will provide enough oxygen for the spider and at the same time help maintain air circulation and humidity. If you cover the air holes with screen, be sure to use a metal screen that the spider cannot chew through easily.

An inch (24mm) or two of potting soil, or a mixture of soil, sand, sphagnum moss, or vermiculite can be used as substrate. Do not use cedar shavings because they are toxic to some invertebrates. Indoor/outdoor carpeting does not hold moisture and is not recommended. Real or artificial stones, plants, or branches are not really necessary for the spider, but can make the cage look "just like home", at least to you. Cactus is a bad idea despite what some books show. You would not want your spider to accidentally impale itself as it fell from the side of the container. Lastly, half a flowerpot or a hollowed piece of bark will provide a place where the spider can hide. Room temperatures, 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit (70=20°C) or so, seem acceptable to most species. A well-maintained cage will have to be thoroughly cleaned only 2 or 3 times a year.

FOOD AND WATER

Tarantulas are predators and will eat just about any living animal they can capture and kill. Crickets, most beetles, grasshoppers, earthworms, moths, and other animals are acceptable. Larger tarantulas sometimes eat small snakes, lizards and mice. Avoid wasps and bees, since they could harm the spider, and do not use insects from areas that might be sprayed for pests. Some tarantulas will occasionally scavenge, and you can offer a small dead minnow or piece of steak. You should not offer food every day. Feeding once a week is enough, and larger spiders can be fed every other week. Spiders will not overeat. Removing uneaten food after a day or so will help keep the cage clean. If your spider looks and acts healthy, but stops feeding for a week or two, do not be alarmed. This is normal and may indicate an upcoming molt.

A plastic jar lid or similar container can be a good water dish, and putting in a few small stones will let the feeder animals crawl out should they fall in. If you use a piece of sponge keep it clean, and do not use cotton (it can get caught in the spider's mouth). Keeping the water dish filled also helps maintain the cage humidity. Many tarantula keepers spray the substrate with water once a week or so to maintain required humidity.

HANDLING

Do not handle your spider. If you need to move them, then use a wide month jar, the spider will usually walk right in if needed use a paint brush can be used to help. If you do pick up the spider with the jar, always keep it close above some solid surface, such as a tabletop or carpet, and be aware that a puff of air or unexpected bump can startle the animal. A fall of only a few centimetres might result in injury to your spider. Always remember that tarantula species differ in their temperaments, and some species are more defensive than others. No live tarantula of any kind can be guaranteed not to bite.

Several tarantula species can kick defensive hairs off the top of the abdomen. If you are sensitive to these hairs, you will usually feel a slight itching. It is always a good idea to rinse your hands and arms after working around your tarantula, and to not rub your eyes until you've done so. Some species cause more itching than others, and individual reactions vary from person to person. It is also not unusual for a tarantula to have a bald spot on its abdomen; the lost hairs will be replaced at the next molt.

GROWTH AND MOLTING

Like all other arthropods, tarantulas molt their exoskeleton periodically. The tarantula generally stops feeding for a week or more, and then usually turns over on its back. The old exoskeleton splits, and the spider works it off and then flips upright. Finally, the new exoskeleton enlarges and hardens. It will be several days before this last part is complete, and the spider does not eat, nor should it be picked-up, during this time. So, if you happen to see your tarantula lying upside down, DO NOT touch it - tarantulas do not die naturally on their backs. To help insure a successful molt remove any live food, mist the substrate with water to increase humidity a bit, and make sure the water dish is full.

MALE OR FEMALE?

From the outside, the sex of a tarantula cannot always be determined with certainty unless the animal is an adult or almost an adult. Males are generally more slender than females, and have longer legs and smaller abdomens.

Adult male tarantulas of most species have a distinct hook on the bottom of the third segment (from the tip) of each front walking leg. Females never have these hooks. Also, adult males have mating structures at the ends of the arm-like appendages (the pedipalps) at the front of the spider. If your tarantula is an adult male the ends of these appendages appear a little bit swollen. The pedipalp ends of immature males, and of females of any age, look like the ends of the walking legs. Lastly, mature and almost mature females have a "cliff" on the bottom of the abdomen, near its base.

LONGEVITY

Female tarantulas can live 20 years or more, Australian species 12 years, but males usually die within a year and a half after becoming adults. Longevity depends, of course, on the species as well as how it is kept.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Two recent books well worth owning are: "Tarantulas and Other Arachnids", by Dr. Samuel Marshall, 1996, and "The Tarantula Keeper's Guide", by Stanley and Marguerite Schultz, 1998.

Australian books:

Spider watch and *The Silken Web*, both by Bert Brunet and all are available through Insektus.

Regards

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