

Royal (Ball) Python (*Python regius*) Care Plan

These snakes from sub-Saharan Africa are nocturnal or crepuscular, hiding in burrows during the day. They can live for 40 years or more and can become very tame if handled regularly. They grow to about 4 feet on average but can reach 6 feet.

Suitability as Pets

Only experienced herpetologists should keep these snakes.

Never purchase a wild caught animal.

Reproduction

Males usually have longer and more curved anal spurs next to the cloaca than females although probing is the most accurate method of sexing them. This should only be carried out by experienced herpetologists or veterinary surgeons.

Housing

Royal pythons require a secure well ventilated large vivarium with the correct temperature gradient. A dark, secure hide is essential. The vivarium must be escape-proof and lockable. As a minimum the vivarium should be two thirds of the snake's length long and one third of the snake's length wide.

Spot clean as necessary to remove faeces and urates and disinfect the cage every 2 months eg with Ark-Klens or Tamodine-E (Vetark).

Juvenile pythons can be kept initially in small plastic containers with a ventilation hole covered by mesh in the lid. Place a third of the container on a heat mat and monitor the temperature gradient as for adults. Use kitchen paper as substrate and provide a hide box or tube and a water bowl.

Lighting

No special lighting is required and a 12 hour day/night photoperiod is suitable.

Heating/ Temperature

The vivarium temperature should be 25-32°C (77-88°F) during the day, with a night-time drop of a few degrees. Night-time temperature should not drop below 23°C (75°F). There should be a temperature gradient from the basking site at one end of the enclosure to the other cooler end, enabling the snake to regulate its own temperature by moving around. This can be achieved using heat mats (juveniles only), ceramic heaters or power plates.

Heat mats should not cover more than a third of the floor area. It is essential that any heaters or lights inside the vivarium are guarded to prevent direct contact by the snake. Use a thermostat to control the heat system. Hot rocks are not recommended as they are a common cause of burns.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Provide a heavy water dish large enough for immersion at the cooler end of the vivarium. An object with an abrasive surface such as a piece of bark should be provided to facilitate shedding of the skin. Newspaper is the most practical substrate though outdoor carpeting or astroturf can also be used. Provide a branch for climbing and basking.

Water /Humidity

Humidity should ideally be 60-80%. It is essential that vivarium temperature (at both ends of the vivarium) and humidity are monitored to ensure that your python is living in the correct environmental conditions. Providing a humidity chamber (plastic box containing damp sphagnum moss) or misting the snake daily just before it sheds will help it to shed successfully.

Diet / Feeding

Wild Royal pythons feed on a variety of vertebrates including birds, mammals, amphibians and other reptiles but in captivity they can be easily maintained on a diet of mice and rats. Do not feed anything wider than the widest part of the snake.

Feed adults every 2-3 weeks at night. Juvenile snakes should be fed every 7-10 days for the first 2-3 years.

Some snakes may be reluctant to feed, especially if wild caught. This may be due to unsuitable environmental conditions, seasonal changes (males may not eat during the breeding season; females will not eat while gravid or incubating eggs), stress (eg due to lack of a hide box), because it is about to shed, or to medical problems. Try warming the food slightly before feeding or offering brown rodents such as gerbils or chicks.

Do not handle your snake for a couple of days after feeding. Provide fresh water every couple of days.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

No specific supplementation is traditional. The quality of the food offered will have an effect upon the snakes nutrition and therefore adequate nutrition of prey species is important.

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Quarantine all new snakes for at least 6 months in order to reduce the chance of transmitting diseases such as Inclusion Body Disease and Ophidian Paramyxovirus infection (two untreatable and fatal viral diseases which pythons are susceptible to).

During this period record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour for each animal.

Have a fresh faecal sample tested for internal parasites such as worms.

If your snake shows any signs of illness such as regurgitation, abnormal body position, decreased appetite or abnormal respiration it should be examined by a vet as soon as possible.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be aware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non-symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immunocompromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.

Further information on husbandry can be found at:

Books