

# PRAYING MANTIS

Praying mantis make unusual and fascinating pets. They are masters of disguise, often resembling plants. Praying mantids (as the plural is known) can be many colours and some have the ability to alter their colouring to match their surroundings i.e.. the Malaysian flower mantis *Hymenopus coronatus*, usually white with pink tinges, when placed on a pink flower the insect becomes a vivid pink. Praying mantis are often said to be more intelligent than 'your average insect'. This is due to the fact that they possess a moveable neck enabling them to turn and watch things. They have good eyesight and are usually bright and alert, the antennae are long and would appear to be used in communication, most praying mantids have wings and can fly quite well.

## HOUSING

Praying mantids can be housed in a large variety of containers. Unfortunately they are usually cannibalistic and must therefore be housed individually. A sweet jar is possibly the simplest cage for a praying mantis. I would advise taking it out regularly to allow the insect to move about more freely, a netting cage make a nice home as the mantis can move around and watch its surroundings or a fish tank with a lid is quite suitable. It is a good idea to place a living plant or other foliage in with your praying mantis. This gives the mantis somewhere to hide and also provides a more humid atmosphere, mantids are very susceptible to dehydration. During the winter some form of heating will be necessary as mantids are mainly tropical. The best way to provide extra warmth is by using a heating pad, as mantids are active creatures they are likely to burn themselves on a light bulb. It is difficult to generalise about temperature as praying mantids occur all over the world, 20c-25c would seem a sensible temperature.

## FEEDING

It is from its feeding habits that the praying mantis receives its name. It was once thought that when the mantis sits in wait for a tasty fly or cricket that it was in fact sitting up and praying. The front legs are always armed with barbs for holding the prey. When a mantis strikes out for its food it does so with lightening speed, they are ferocious hunters, all mantids are carnivorous and will eat a wide variety of small creatures. The most suitable food to give them in captivity is flies or crickets. Flies can be obtained as maggots from a fishing shop and allowed to hatch and many pet shops stock small tubs of crickets. Mantids need to drink, it is important to provide them with a pad of damp cotton wool and to spray their cage regularly with tepid water from a plant sprayer.

## BREEDING

Breeding praying mantids is not an easy task as the female is inclined to devour the usually smaller male. Determining the sex can be tricky, the female has six abdominal segments and the male has eight. The best way to see the number of segments is from underneath. To prevent the female from eating the male you must provide her with as much food as she can eat before introducing them. I would recommend slowly introducing the two mantids and watching them (often for hours, I have done this on many occasions). The male will usually soothe the female by stroking her antennae with his own. If the female is receptive he will then jump onto her back and pairing will take place. A couple of weeks later the female will produce an ootheca (egg case), the ootheca is usually attached to a stick, it can be left in the cage, but it is best to remove it and incubate it in a sweet jar with damp vermiculite on the bottom. The nymphs will hatch within a few weeks and they emerge from the ootheca on a thread and run around like ants. They disperse quickly to avoid becoming a meal for each other. At this stage the young should be separated if possible and fed on fruit flies.