

STICK INSECTS

Stick insects are a group of insects which resemble plants. They are known as phasmids from the family phasmidae. It is difficult to generalise about them, indeed many species do resemble sticks. However, others are huge insects with large leaf-like projections on their body and legs. All stick insects are masters of camouflage, even the largest of species can blend in with the foliage on which they live, to become almost invisible.

HOUSING

Stick insects can be housed in a variety of containers, if only two or three of the smaller species are to be kept they can live happily in a sweet jar. However for larger species or larger numbers a netting cage or fish tank with a lid is more suitable. Stick insects can all be housed together. It is important to provide enough room for the insects to shed their skins, stick insects hang from the old skin to dry themselves and must therefore have a tall rather than wide cage. Many species of stick insects can live at room temperature i.e.. Indian, Pink Winged and Annam, others will need some additional warmth, which is best provided with a heating pad placed below the cage. If a stick insect does become too cold it will usually stop eating and become inactive, a temperature of 20c-25c is recommended.

FEEDING

Almost all stick insects will feed on bramble (blackberry bush), which is easily obtainable and retains its leaves during the winter. The Indian stick insect will also feed on privet and many species will feed on oak, rose and beech. I like to give my stick insects a mixture of plants as well as bramble whenever possible. I have never known any plants to be harmful, the insects generally ignore any that they do not like. Stick insects like a humid atmosphere, it is important that they do not become too dry. I spray the cage a couple of times a day with a fine mist of tepid water using a plant sprayer.

BREEDING

Stick insects are generally quite easy to breed, many if not all can reproduce by parthenogenesis. This is without the need for fertilisation by a male, the offspring will all be female. In several species the males are unknown in captivity and this is therefore the only method by which they reproduce i.e. Indian, Pink Winged. Mating usually takes place during the night and two or three weeks later the female will begin to lay eggs. Stick insects live for about a year and lay a large number of eggs during this time. The eggs are very often just dropped onto the floor of the cage, some species will lay them in the ground and must therefore be given a container of peat or vermiculite. The Pink Winged stick insect will glue her eggs into crevices in the cage or food plant. The eggs of stick insects often take some months to hatch, they can be left to emerge in the cage, but a safer method is to remove them and place them in a closed box, on a bed of peat, sand or vermiculite. The eggs should be kept warm, the airing cupboard is a good place, if the eggs are not kept warm they will take longer to hatch. They must not be allowed to dry out, this is the usual reason for failure. When the nymphs emerge they can be placed in with the adults, it is a good idea to provide them with fresh food which will have softer leaves. If the leaves are a bit tough you should cut around the edge of the leaf to encourage the young insects to feed.