

TARANTULAS

Tarantula spiders are often very pretty, with long silky hairs, not a bit like the little spiders that you might find running round your house or garden. The Oxford dictionary defines tarantula as a “large hairy tropical spider”. Tarantulas live for many years and each one has its own personality, however I find that most can be put into two classes, plodders and runners. The most docile plodders are the Mexican Red Knee and the Chile Rose, among the runners is the Pink Toe and the Trinidad Chevron.

HOUSING

Tarantulas are solitary creatures, they must always be housed alone or they will fight. They do not need a large amount of space a tank 12”x12”x12” is suitable for most species. The tank should have a close fitting lid as tarantulas climb very well. Vermiculite should be placed on the bottom of the tank, along with pieces of wood to climb on, a flowerpot or half a coconut shell to hide in and an open water dish to drink from. These are the basics you can add lots of things for interest i.e.. a small living plant. Warmth and humidity are important factors. Spiders do not like strong light, so I would suggest a heating mat. The mat can be placed beneath the tank or on the back of the tank. Some spiders are arboreal, they like to live in trees. These spiders will make a web up the cage rather than burrow down into the vermiculite. Humidity can be maintained by a light spray of water once a day, or when necessary. Conditions needed will vary according to species, as a guide I would say they should be kept at 75F and 75% humidity.

FEEDING

Tarantulas must have live food, they will eat many creatures of the correct size for the spider (hence the name “bird eating spider”, a very large spider could eat a very small bird!). Crickets are the usual food, many pet shops sell tubs at a reasonable price. I find cockroaches are a very good food, you can also use locusts, mealworms, moths etc. I feed my spiders once a week, appetites vary amazingly, tarantulas cannot be overfed. Sometimes a spider will not eat for weeks, this is nothing to worry about it usually means it is about to shed its skin. Young spiders moult every few weeks, but once adult they usually moult about once a year. The spider turns over onto its back and slowly pulls its body out of the old skin. A tarantula looks beautiful just after a moult and can look rather tatty when it is about to moult.

BREEDING

Breeding tarantulas is a complicated procedure, there is not enough space here to go into details. I am pleased to say that most species imported as adults have now been successfully bred in captivity. Although female tarantulas live as adults for many years, once a male has matured he only has about a year to live. A male tarantula usually has longer legs than the female and two hooks on his front legs, he is often very active. When preparing to mate your tarantulas it is important to feed the female well. I introduce the spiders slowly, keeping them in the same tank with a divider down the middle for a couple of days. When the divider is removed mating is usually very rapid and nerve racking to watch as it is difficult to tell if all is well. The male pushes the female until she is up on her hind legs and then deposits sperm into her reproductive opening. When finished he makes a hasty retreat and should be removed immediately. It is not true that the female always eats her mate although it does happen occasionally. Another myth to be dispelled is that a tarantula bite is deadly poisonous. I have not been bitten myself, but those who have assure me that it is comparable to a bee sting.