Basic Care Sheet

Tarantulas

By Marc Ellis

www.slithersandcritters.com

Introduction

The name Tarantula originates from the Middle Ages in Taranto, Italy, with a large burrowing wolf spider Lycosa tarantula that was thought to be very venomous. The popular dance “Tarantulala” was thought to cure the Tarantula’s bite and was also used as an excuse to dance wildly, which was frowned upon by the Church at that time.

The Europeans brought the memory of the wolf spider to the Americas and the name Tarantula was then used for a completely different type of spider. “Tarantula” is now generally accepted by hobbyists to designate the approximately 850 species of spiders in the Theraphosidae family.

What makes a spider a tarantula is not just its large size. Unlike other spiders, whose fangs bite with a side-to-side action meeting in the middle, the tarantula bites with an up-down action. A tarantula has two claws and adhesive pads on each foot. The tarantula breathes using two pairs of book lungs.

There are two groups of tarantulas that you will hear people talk about: new world, which are tarantulas that come from the Western hemisphere of the Americas; and old world, which come from the Eastern hemisphere. Most new world tarantulas have urticating hair on the abdomen that they can flick in defense; they are less likely to bite. This makes new world tarantulas good for beginners, but there are some new world tarantulas that will be quick to bite. The old world tarantulas don`t have the urticating hairs like the new world, so they can be quick to bite in defense.

I hope before you go and buy your first (or tenth) tarantula, you know what you want from the animal, whether it’s to be a pet that you want to be able to handle, or an animal to keep/display. It’s important to choose the right tarantula for you. New world tarantulas are best for first-time keepers and are best as pets. Arboreal tarantulas can make great displays, but it don’t mean that your will see the tarantula all the time; they do like to hide. Burrowing tarantulas can be obligated to dig and can dig deep holes if given the chance. Many keepers call burrowing tarantulas “pet holes” because you will feed and water a hole and almost never see the tarantula. Nevertheless, tarantulas are fascinating and rewarding to keep, even just as pet holes.

Terrarium

There are three enclosure types to keep your tarantula in depending on the lifestyles of the tarantulas you are housing. All tarantulas are cannibalistic so they should be kept on their own.
There are many different styles of terrariums, for instance: glass tanks, critter keepers, and even plastic lunch boxes, shoe boxes and sweater boxes. No matter what type of terrarium you choose it must be absolutely escape-proof.

**Terrestrial or opportunistic burrowers:** Tarantulas that are classed as terrestrial don’t dig their own burrows but will sometimes modify an existing burrow or a natural hole under logs and rocks, into a retreat/hide which they will line with silk. When keeping terrestrial tarantulas I like to keep them with 5 – 8cm (2”- 3”in) of substrate. Having this deeper substrate helps to control humidity in the terrarium for tarantulas that need a higher humidity.

I offer them a hide, which can be anything from a hollow log, cork bark, or even a plant pot. With hides it is important to remember that if the hide is heavy it could fall on the tarantula. I like to keep the terrarium simple — the more objects and decorations you include in it, the more places your tarantula’s food has to hide from it.

When it comes to terrarium size, generally, three times the leg span of the tarantula in length and width is safe. Don’t give them a terrarium that is too tall — they are not built to climb and if they do, they could fall and hurt themselves.

**Burrowers:** Some of these tarantulas will do little digging and so are just obligated to dig. All tarantulas retreat for safety from predators and the elements… Burrowing tarantulas have taken it that much further by sometimes digging very deep burrows. Considering that tarantulas dig to escape elements like heat, if you heat the terrarium from the bottom it is unatrail and the tarantula will dig down to escape the heat… which it can’t so it will just keep digging in confusion.

As with the terrestrial tarantula, the terrarium should be three times the leg span in length and width as a general guide. It is good to give burrowing tarantulas substrate that is as deep as the tarantula is long. When setting up a burrowing tarantula’s terrarium, it is vital that there is nothing the tarantula can dig under that would cause it to fall on the tarantula. You can help your tarantula out by making a starter burrow when setting up the terrarium.

**Arboreal:** Just because these tarantulas are classed as arboreal doesn’t that they just live in trees — they can live on cliff faces on steep banks and even in buildings, but of course, also on trees. Arboreal tarantulas need sufficient room to spin their webs, and they tend to need more room for their size then the others types of tarantulas I have mentioned.

The depth of the substrate doesn’t affect the tarantula because it doesn’t live on the ground, but I still like to use a minimum of 5cm (2”in) substrate to help control humidity. I tend to give my arboreal tarantulas a hide consisting of a bark tube dug in to the middle of the terrarium for them to build their web retreat inside (it doesn’t mean that this is where they will build their web — sometimes they like corners of the terrarium more).

**Substrate**

There are a few different kinds of substrate you can use: vermiculite, peat moss, fine bark mulch, and coconut fiber. In the time I have been keeping tarantulas I have used most of these
substrates. Now, I only use coconut fiber because of its ability to hold moisture, and when it’s packed into the terrarium a tarantula can dig through without it collapsing. For tarantulas that came from arid regions, keep the substrate only slightly moist (it shouldn’t be moist to touch). Tarantulas that come from a rain forest can be kept slightly damper. Dampped substrate creates humidity as it dries.

Care

Tarantulas do not demand much maintenance — they keep neat homes. Regularly remove food remnants which they’ll deposit in one corner of their home, and wash excreta from the terrarium’s surface using warm water without any cleaning agent. When it comes down to temperature and humidity, the way a tarantula lives in its natural habitat is the best guide on how to keep them.

Daytime temperature can be 24-27°C (75.2-80.6°F). North American and Chilean tarantulas can be kept cooler but if kept at less than 20°C (68°F) and they usually won't feed. The night-time temperature drop can go down to 20°C (68°F); some tarantulas can tolerate a maximum drop down to 15°C (59°F). Burrowing tarantulas should be kept somewhat cooler, at 20-24°C (68-75.2°F). Many arboreal tarantulas prefer a daytime temperature of 25-28°C (77-82.4°F) with a night-time drop at 20-23°C (68-73.4°F). Arboreal tarantulas tend to like the higher end of humidity around 70-80%.

Humidity is important for all tarantulas, even ones that come from deserts. Keep in mind that in a deep burrow, the temperature is cooler and the humidity is higher than at the surface. Most tarantulas do well with humidity at 60% and up. Humidity is especially important during molting. Terrariums that are too dry will cause moulting problems. Spray part of the terrarium regularly. Tarantulas that come from a rain forest can be kept slightly damper, in the case of arboreal tarantulas once per week or more if needed.

Do not keep tarantulas too wet — this can cause mould. And be sure to never directly spray the cobweb or the tarantula itself.

In the wild, tarantulas drink water from a variety of sources. Much of the tarantula’s moisture comes from their food, but water is very important. They can go a long time without food but they will die quickly without water. In the old days you would use a bowl with cotton wool or a sponge in it; this is unnecessary and can breed bacteria. I have seen cricket jelly used for tarantulas — this doesn’t work — the cricket eats the jelly and gets the moisture. A tarantula doesn’t eat the jelly (its “Cricket Jelly”). You can provide a shallow bowl of fresh water on the side of the terrarium that you spray. I like the bowl to be smaller than the leg span of the tarantula. With slings you can spray a corner of the terrarium each week depending on the tarantula’s moisture and humidity needs.
Feeding

Something to remember when feeding your tarantula — even though tarantulas have eight eyes they are basically blind. Tarantulas feed by feeling vibrations and like most other spiders, they are not picky eaters. Tarantulas eat prey that is slightly smaller than themselves as long as they can overpower it. As important as it is to not under feed, it is just as important not to over feed, which can be hard because it’s fun to watch them eat.

Feed one to three prey items regularly each week. Remove uneaten prey items from a satisfied tarantula. There are many reasons for tarantulas not to eat. Sometimes North American species will stop eating in late autumn and winter. All tarantulas will stop eating for several days before a molt, and they will stop eating if they are too cold or sick. Tarantulas will also stop eating when they are just too full to eat any more. If your tarantula is healthy, don’t worry if your tarantula stops eating — they can go weeks or even months without eating. Just keep offering them prey items each week.

Moult ing

Moult ing is how a tarantula grows they have an exoskeleton, so when there skeleton is too small they must molt to grow. Moult ing is a very stressful time for tarantulas. Young tarantulas moult every one to two months. An adult male does not moult aging and adult females moult one to three times a year. There are some behavioral signs to let you know that your tarantula is going to moult: they will stop eating, or they can become very sluggish — so much so that they can appear dead. Terrestrial tarantulas spin a mat on the substrate or in their burrow, then lie on their back or sometimes their side. Arboreal tarantulas moult in a tube-like web. When you notice this behavior, do not poke it or try to flip it over. You may cause fatal injuries to the tarantula if it is moult ing.

When a tarantula moult s, the prosoma and opisthosoma spilt open the old skin is then pushed by the leg. After molting a tarantula is very fragile. The new exoskeleton is soft, which allows the tarantula to grow. IMPORTANT: Do not to feed your tarantula for at least one week after it sheds its skin or until the exoskeleton has hardened. If you feed your tarantula while its exoskeleton is still soft, the prey could very easily eat your tarantula.

Comment s

Like with all of the pets in your life, the more that you learn about them the better you can look after them. This basic care sheet is written about approximately 850 species of spiders in the family Theraphosidae. So I recommend you seek out more information about each and every species that you plan to keep. It is important that you know what you want from an animal before you get it.

I enjoy all the tarantulas in my collection, from the ones that I see all the time to the ones that I hardly ever see out. Tarantulas are great animals to keep — low maintenance but very rewarding pets.