

# ARGENTINE TEGU

By Catherine Love, DVM

Updated 2022

## NATURAL HISTORY

Tegus are large, intelligent lizards native to South American rainforests, savannahs, and semi-arid forests. The common species in the pet trade are the Argentine tegu *Salvator merianae* (black and white tegu) and *Salvator rufescens* (red tegu). *Tupinambis teguixin* (Colombian or gold tegu) may also be seen in the pet trade but is less common due to their more defensive natures. This guide focuses on Argentine tegus as these species are more commonly kept as pets. Tegus are diurnal, terrestrial lizards that actively hunt during the day and use their powerful jaws to tear prey apart. Despite the resemblance, tegus are not monitors and possess tail autotomy (they can drop their tail). Tegus are considered an invasive species in Florida.

## CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIOR

Tegus are highly intelligent lizards, with some keepers claiming they are able to learn to come when called and even be house trained. However, tegus are powerful, large lizards and should not be considered scaly puppies. Every animal is an individual; all reptiles take time and effort to tame, and tegus should not be obtained with the intention of having an instantaneously docile pet. A tegu's bite is powerful, and their claws are sharp and specialized for digging burrows and aiding in tearing prey. They may also whip their muscular tails if they feel threatened. They are not reptiles suitable for novice keepers and should only be kept by experienced keepers prepared for a large, long-lived, expensive, powerful reptile.

## LIFESPAN

15-20 years.

## ADULT SIZE

Argentine black and white tegus often reach 3-5 feet and 10-15lbs. Red tegus tend to be heavier.

## HOUSING

Being large lizards, tegus need large enclosures. An 8'x4'x4' is the minimum size for a tegu. The general rule of thumb for housing reptiles is that a lizard should have an enclosure that is at least 3x the length of their body, so a 5' tegu would need up to a 15' enclosure, which would need to be custom made or ordered. To maintain humidity, avoiding enclosures with screen tops is recommended (PVC enclosures are a good alternative). Cypress mulch or ReptiChip (coconut husk) mixed with peat moss, top soil, or sphagnum moss can create a humidity holding substrate that is suitable for tegus. The Bio Dude's Terra Firma is also an acceptable option, particularly for keepers choosing to go bioactive. Tegus should have at least 12-18" of substrate to allow them to burrow and dig. Commercial hides may not be large enough for tegus and keepers may have to make their own. Small pet carriers, large tupperware containers, or covered cat litter boxes may all be used as hides for tegus. As with all reptiles, tegus should have hides on both the warm and cool side of their enclosure so they don't have to choose between thermoregulation and security. Tegus should also have ground clutter, logs, branches, and plants (live or fake) to provide cover and enrichment. If loose substrate is not provided, a dig box is a must to allow natural digging and burrowing behavior.



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## LIGHTING

Like all lizards, tegus require UVB light to synthesize vitamin D3 in their skin. Vitamin D3 is needed for proper metabolism of calcium and prevention of metabolic bone disease. The Arcadia T5 12% Desert, or Arcadia T5 6% Forest are both acceptable choices, depending on where your tegu's basking spot is set up. Arcadia provides a guide as to where to place your UVB fixture in relation to your tegu's basking spot. UVB fixtures should be roughly as long as half your reptile's enclosure length. It is important to note that UVB cannot penetrate glass, so natural sunlight through a window will not be sufficient for a lizard to synthesize vitamin D3. Allowing safe outdoor time is also an excellent source of UVB and visible light. Tegus taken outdoors should be kept in an escape-proof and predator-proof, non-glass enclosure. Provide shade and basking spots so your tegu can regulate their temperature.

Sunlight is made of ultraviolet, near infrared (IR), mid IR, far IR, and visible light. It is our job as keepers to provide full spectrum lighting, which means as close to sunlight as possible. Unfortunately there is not one source for all of these components, so we must provide multiple types of lighting. For visible light, LED or halide bulbs should be provided.

UVB is NOT optional for lizards. Lack of proper UVB can lead to impaired skeletal, muscle, and immune function. Replace UVB bulbs every 6 months, as they can continue to give off light even when not producing UVB. Lights should be turned off at night to maintain normal day/night cycles. For this reason, red or black nightlights should not be used as they can disrupt normal day/night cycles.

Arcadia UVB guide:  
<https://www.arcadiareptile.com/lighting/guide/>

## HEAT

Unlike mammals, reptiles cannot internally regulate their temperature and rely on their environment to heat and cool themselves. Therefore, it is important that we provide captive reptiles with a temperature gradient so they can warm up or cool down as needed. Reptiles have three temperatures to measure: basking spot, warm ambient, and cool ambient. The basking spot is the hottest area in the enclosure where they bask, the warm ambient is the air temperature on the warm side of the enclosure, and the cool ambient is the air temperature on the cool side of the enclosure. Ambient temperatures are best measured with digital thermometers (one on the warm end and one on the cool end), as analog thermometers are often inaccurate. Basking temperatures can be measured with a digital infrared thermometer.

Tegus need a basking temperature of 110-130F, a warm ambient of 90-95F, and a cool ambient of 75-85F. Any light emitting sources should be turned off at night, but a non light emitting source like a ceramic heat emitter, radiant heat panel, or deep heat projector may be needed to keep the temperature in the high 60s to low 70s. Sustained temperatures below 65F will induce hibernation.

Sunlight is made of UV, near IR, mid IR, far IR, and visible light. Flood tungsten-halogen bulbs are the most efficient at producing near IR, which is the most abundant IR in sunlight, and they also produce significant mid IR and some far IR. Far IR is the least abundant in sunlight, but is most often produced in large amounts by sources like ceramic heat emitters, heat pads, and radiant heat panels. Tungsten-halogen bulbs should be the flood type to ensure a wide enough basking site. These heat producing bulbs can be found as reptile specific bulbs or at hardware stores. A cluster of bulbs may be needed to create a basking spot large enough for an adult tegu. Avoid hot rocks as these can easily burn reptiles.



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## HUMIDITY

Humidity should be maintained at 70-80%. Tegus also may also enjoy having a pool large enough to soak in. Digital hygrometers are best for measuring ambient humidity. Ensure ventilation is adequate to prevent mold build up from high humidity. Deep, humidity holding substrate can keep an enclosure from drying out. An automatic mister or fogger can also be used to create humidity spikes. It is normal for humidity levels to drop slightly to more moderate levels (around 50%) during the day, and then spike at night. This can be replicated with heavy misting in the morning and evening. PVC enclosures are much better at holding humidity than glass enclosures with a screen top.

## FEEDING

Tegus are true omnivores, and often opportunistic in nature. They consume numerous types of plant matter, fruits, eggs, birds, fish, insects, carrion, larvae, seeds, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals. In captivity, feeding a variety of foods is important for avoiding nutrient deficiencies and providing enrichment. Given their intelligence, tegus may enjoy puzzle feeders (homemade or purchased). The portion size should be roughly the size of the tegu's skull. Tegus are prone to obesity, so avoid feeding fatty table scraps. A multivitamin with vitamin A can be provided 1-2x/week. Remove all uneaten food to prevent spoilage, and to prevent feeder insects from snacking on your tegu.

Protein: Crickets, nightcrawlers, roaches, hornworms, mealworms, superworms, silkworms, snails, phoenix worms, grasshoppers. Young tegus tend to eat more insects, but adults will still consume them as well. Rodents, beef heart, frogs, rabbits, shrimp, fish (cooked or non-goldfish feeders), ground meat, chicks, quail, and eggs are also good sources of protein. Insects are naturally deficient in calcium and low in nutritional value. In order to make them nutritious for reptiles, all insects should be gutloaded (fed a highly nutritious meal 24-48 hours before feeding). Repashy BugBurger or Arcadia InsectFuel are good choices for feeding feeder insects. Insects should also be dusted with calcium powder

## HEAT

1-2x/week. Calcium powders should be calcium carbonate based and should not have any phosphorus. If you are providing adequate UVB, calcium powder does not need to contain D3. Arcadia, Repashy, and ZooMed all have good products. Follow your brand's recommendations to avoid overdosing. Commercial products such as Repashy, Mazuri, or Reptilinks can be used as well as protein sources. The occasional high protein, low carb cat or dog food is also acceptable as a mix in or treat.

Veggies/herbs: Alfalfa, pumpkin, cactus pads, bell peppers, parsnips, carrots, cilantro, dandelion, squash, yam, kale, mustard greens, turnip greens, endive, escarole, basil, collard greens, hibiscus, cucumber, zucchini, broccoli.

Fruit: Apples without seeds, berries, cherries without pits, cactus fruit, mango, melon, papaya, grapes.

Feeding schedule and diet composition:

Hatchlings (<6 months): 70-80% animal protein, 20-30% plant matter 5x/week

Juveniles (7-12 months): 70-80% animal protein, 20-30% plant matter 4x/week

Subadults (1-3 years): 70-80% animal protein, 20-30% plant matter 3x/week

Adults (>3 years): 60% animal protein, 30% veggies, 10% fruit 2-3x/week depending on body condition



# BALL/ROYAL PYTHON

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## WATER

Fresh water large enough to soak in should always be available. Tegus are proficient swimmers; a kiddie pool may be an enjoyable enrichment option for a tegu.

## SEXING

Tegus reach sexual maturity around 3 years. Males tend to have very large jowls and larger heads. Overweight females may have large jowls so this is not always a reliable sexing method. Males over 3 feet should also have small bumps called “bb’s” or “beads” on either side of their vent.

## ZOONOSIS

Like other reptiles, tegus can carry Salmonella. Always wash your hands after handling reptiles or items from their enclosure. Special considerations should also be taken into account for their sharp teeth and claws. Any penetration of skin should be washed very thoroughly.

## HEALTH

Tegus are very often obese, and may also be prone to nutritional-secondary hyperparathyroidism (metabolic bone disease), dysecdysis (shedding issues), reproductive disorders, stomatitis (mouth rot), and respiratory infections. A tegu should be bright, active, and have an upright posture. Analyzing a tegu’s body condition can be difficult, but there are certain signs that can indicate obesity. Tegus are heavy bodied lizards, but they should not have fat folds on their limbs. Very overweight animals may even have so much fat that their ears are no longer visible, and their tails and feet may look swollen/puffy. Additionally, a healthy tegu has a line of folded skin on their side called a lateral skin fold. This fold becomes difficult to distinguish when a tegu is overweight. Overweight tegus may drag their abdomen along the ground and have difficulty moving well, or may decrease their activity entirely. Jowls can be difficult to judge since

## HEALTH

males naturally have large structures under their chin. The muscle that makes up a tegu’s jowl is naturally larger in a male, but for both sexes it is still a spot of fat deposition. Jowls that are massive or completely flabby are indicative of an overweight tegu. Healthy tegus hold themselves off the ground when they walk and are active lizards. They should tongue flick when exploring and their eyes and nostrils should be clear of any discharge/debris. Brumation is generally not required/recommended for non-breeding tegus.

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