



## **Habitat**

Keeping reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates is not a new pastime. It is well documented to have occurred several hundred years ago, becoming more popular some 150–200 years ago. At that time most keepers were wealthy menagerie keepers, who loved to show off their exotic animals as a symbol of their prosperity. From those days, through to the Victorian times, where the hobby fused with the pastime of planted vivaria, we have gone in a complete circle. Whilst in recent times (perhaps the last 20–30 years) the more “sterile” habitat has been favoured, there is currently been a resurgence in what has become known as the 'bio-active' natural terrarium. There are followers of both, and there is a place for both.

### **“Sterile” Habitat**

Until around the 1980's, a more naturalistic approach was taken, often with plants, logs and rocks from the natural terrain. There were several books and papers that described a new method in the mid-80s onwards – the plastic box technique was born.

Essentially, for many species (especially Leopard geckos, Corn snakes and similar) this provides everything the individual animals require – heat, water and hiding areas. It is still very popular, and has a proven track record of success over many years and generations. The enclosure is often

constructed of an easily cleaned material such as plastic, and often heated from below.

Easily cleaned hides are provided for security, usually with a choice of a dry hide and a humid hide, along with a water bowl. Heat is provided at one end of the vivarium, generally by an under floor heater (see heating section). Lighting is generally not provided for many species kept in this style – Corn snakes, Leopard geckos, Royal pythons. This method will often provide the less experienced keeper with a good balance of ease of maintenance and healthy animals (with a long life span). This probably considered the most suitable for the more “domesticated” species, such as Leopard geckos, Corn snakes and Royal pythons.

## **Natural Bio-active Habitat**

The Natural Bio-active habitat, is a more in-depth technique, that will provide the more experience keeper with not only great success but the pride in knowing they are providing the closest possible life experience to the wild for the animals in their care. However, it is not beyond the committed beginner and doesn't have to be considered difficult. In some ways a bio-active vivarium is easier to maintain than a sterile one.

This is a hobby in itself and its foundations are on creating a balanced microclimate biotope, as close to what the wild animals will live in. This includes plants, soil, bugs such as springtails, drainage layers, etc that all work together to provide a thriving slice of the wild in your living room.

The vivarium itself is best planned out and built over several weeks, taking your time to consider as many details as you can. Backgrounds can be built that include areas for plants and moss to grow. False floor / water reservoir vivaria allow for deep water areas – some even deep enough for fish and aquatic amphibians to share the vivarium. Waterfalls are easy to build in this style. Less complicated designs can use a drainage layer under the soil rather than a false floor. The soil can be planted with a wide variety of plants and moss. Branches can be secured allowing airplants and bromelia to be successfully grown. The soil can be populated with various bugs such as springtails, woodlice and worms (commonly referred to as the clean up crew) that will (along with the plants) clean up the faecal matter from the animals being kept – it really is the full circle of life. Lighting systems allow not only for natural lights UVB output but also for the full spectrum the plants need too. Once built, allow it to settle with no animals for the plants to establish for a couple of weeks – then settle down and watch as

you release the community of animals into their new home. Much better than any aquarium for de-stressing on an evening after a hard days work – sit back and become enthralled at species such as frogs, Garter snakes, Anoles (and many, many more) going through their natural activities!

**This care sheet was kindly provided by Kevin Stevens of Coast to Coast Exotics.**

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