

Green Iguana

Care Guide for New Owners

Green Iguana

Reptile

Advanced Level

Large Animal

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Iguana iguana
Lifespan	10 to 20 years with proper care
Adult Size	4 to 6 feet nose to tail tip; 8 to 20 lbs
Activity Cycle	Diurnal; active during the day
Temperament	Variable; can become very tame or remain defensive; requires consistent work
Enclosure Size	Adults need custom enclosures: minimum 8x4x6 ft tall
Basking Temp	95 to 105 degrees F basking surface
Ambient Temp	80 to 88 degrees F warm side; 75 to 80 degrees F cool side
UVB	High-output UVB essential; Ferguson Zone 3 to 4
Humidity	60 to 70 percent; tropical species requiring consistent moisture
Diet	Strict herbivore; leafy greens and vegetables only
Legal Status	Legal in Wisconsin; verify local ordinances; some municipalities restrict

An Honest Introduction

Green iguanas are extraordinary animals. They are ancient-looking, impressively large, intelligent, and capable of forming genuine bonds with patient, dedicated owners. A well-socialized adult iguana who trusts its keeper is one of the most remarkable reptile companions imaginable.

They are also one of the most commonly surrendered reptiles in the United States, and it is not hard to understand why. Baby iguanas are sold for very low prices in pet stores, where they look manageable and fascinating. What the price tag and the small enclosure on display do not communicate is that this animal will grow to 5 feet long and 15 pounds, require an enclosure the size of a small room, demand a very specific diet and lighting setup, need years of consistent handling to become truly tame, and live for 15 to 20 years.

Green iguanas are wild animals that human beings have chosen to bring into captivity. That choice carries real responsibility. The iguana did not ask for this. It deserves an owner who has genuinely thought through what that means and who is prepared to provide the environment, the time, and the commitment that a healthy captive iguana requires. If that is you, this guide will help you give one a life worth living.

Wild Population Pressure

Green iguanas are native to Central and South America and are still heavily collected from the wild for the pet trade in some regions despite captive breeding efforts. When sourcing an iguana, always ask whether it is captive-bred. Wild-caught iguanas carry heavy parasite loads, are significantly more difficult to tame, and their removal contributes to population pressure on wild animals that belong in their ecosystems.

Where They Come From

Green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) are native to tropical Central and South America, ranging from Mexico through Brazil, as well as several Caribbean islands. They are highly arboreal animals, spending most of their time in the forest canopy near water. They are strong swimmers and will drop from branches into water to escape predators.

Their natural habitat features intense tropical sunlight with very high UV levels, consistently warm and humid conditions, abundant plant material at canopy height, and proximity to water. Every aspect of their care in captivity is an attempt to replicate conditions that they evolved over millions of years to thrive in. The challenge for any iguana keeper is that fully replicating those conditions in a home environment is genuinely difficult and expensive.

Legal Considerations

Green iguanas are legal to own in Wisconsin at the state level. However, some municipalities within Wisconsin have local ordinances restricting large reptile ownership. Before adopting, check with your local city or county offices. If you rent, verify your lease. Homeowners associations may also have rules that apply.

It is also worth knowing that green iguanas have been introduced to and have become invasive in Florida and Hawaii, where they are now classified as nuisance species. Never release an iguana or any captive animal into the wild under any circumstances.

Enclosures: The Biggest Challenge

Housing is where most iguana owners face their biggest obstacle. A baby iguana in a 20-gallon tank looks reasonable. An adult iguana needs a custom-built enclosure that most people are simply not prepared for. This is not a detail to defer. Plan for the adult enclosure before you adopt.

Adult Enclosure Size

An adult green iguana needs a minimum enclosure of 8 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 6 feet tall. Iguanas are arboreal and need vertical height as much as floor space. Many dedicated iguana owners convert entire spare bedrooms or build custom walk-in enclosures. This is not an exaggeration or an extreme recommendation. It is the genuine minimum for an animal that can reach 5 to 6 feet in length and needs to climb, bask, and move freely.

Juveniles can be started in smaller enclosures and upgraded regularly as the animal grows. Do not wait until the iguana is clearly too large for its space. Plan and budget for upgrades in advance.

Enclosure Construction

At adult size, commercially available reptile enclosures are almost never adequate. Most iguana keepers build custom enclosures from wood framed with wire mesh panels and sealed interior surfaces, or convert large wardrobes or rooms with appropriate modifications. Materials must be waterproof or thoroughly sealed, as iguanas require high humidity and are messy animals. All wood surfaces must be sealed with a reptile-safe waterproof finish to prevent bacterial and mold growth.

Provide multiple elevated basking shelves or branches at different heights, a large soaking tub or shallow pool on the floor, and hiding areas at both ground level and elevated positions. The enclosure must be secure, as iguanas are strong and can push through poorly secured doors.

UVB Lighting: Critical and Non-Negotiable

Green iguanas require intense, high-quality UVB lighting to synthesize Vitamin D3 and absorb calcium. Without it, they develop metabolic bone disease, a progressive, painful, and potentially fatal condition. No amount of dietary calcium supplementation fully compensates for absent or inadequate UVB.

Use high-output T5 HO UVB bulbs rated for Zone 3 to 4 animals, such as the Arcadia T5 HO 12 percent or Zoo Med T5 HO Reptisun 10.0. For a large enclosure, multiple bulbs spanning the length of the basking area are needed. Mount bulbs inside the enclosure for maximum UV delivery. UV radiation is filtered by glass and significantly reduced through mesh, so distance and placement matter. Replace UVB bulbs every 6 months regardless of visible output.

Photoperiod should match natural cycles: 12 to 14 hours of light per day. All lighting turns off at night. Iguanas experiencing natural light cycles through a window can benefit from this, but window glass filters UV radiation entirely, so outdoor sunlight through glass provides no UV benefit. Direct outdoor sun exposure in warm weather, with supervision and access to shade, is genuinely beneficial.

Temperature and Basking

Target Temperatures

Basking surface: 95 to 105 degrees F. Measure with a temperature gun directly on the surface.

Warm side ambient: 80 to 88 degrees F.

Cool side ambient: 75 to 80 degrees F.

Nighttime low: Should not fall below 70 degrees F.

Halogen flood bulbs are the recommended basking heat source for iguanas. They produce the infrared radiation that warms the animal most naturally and effectively. The wattage needed depends on the height of the basking shelf and the enclosure size. Use a dimmer or thermostat to regulate output. Ceramic heat emitters can be used for overnight or ambient supplemental heat.

Iguanas are visual baskers who need to see a clearly defined basking spot. Place the basking branch or shelf directly under the basking bulb at an appropriate distance to achieve the target surface temperature. Verify with a temperature gun regularly.

Humidity

Green iguanas require consistent humidity between 60 and 70 percent. This is significantly higher than many other reptiles and can be challenging to maintain in a home environment, especially in dry climates or during winter with forced-air heating running. Use a digital hygrometer to monitor. Misting

the enclosure once or twice daily, providing a large soaking tub, and using a moisture-retaining substrate all help maintain appropriate humidity. An automated misting system on a timer is a practical investment for large iguana enclosures.

Diet: Strict Herbivore

Green iguanas are strict herbivores. Insects, meat, eggs, dairy, and commercial reptile foods containing animal protein should never be offered. Feeding animal protein to an iguana causes kidney damage and gout over time. This is one of the most common dietary mistakes made by new iguana owners who assume that lizards eat insects.

The diet should consist primarily of dark leafy greens, making up about 50 to 60 percent of the total diet, with a variety of vegetables making up the remainder. Offer food fresh daily. Variety is important for nutritional completeness.

Safe Foods

- Collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens (staples)
- Dandelion greens and flowers
- Endive, escarole, arugula
- Butternut squash, acorn squash, kabocha
- Green beans, snap peas
- Hibiscus flowers and leaves
- Mango, papaya, figs (occasional treats)

Never Feed These

- Any animal protein: insects, meat, eggs, dairy
- Spinach (blocks calcium absorption in large amounts)
- Iceberg lettuce (no nutrition)
- Avocado (toxic)
- Onions, garlic (toxic)
- Citrus in large amounts
- Commercially prepared iguana food as primary diet
- Dog or cat food of any kind

Calcium Supplementation

Dust fresh food with calcium carbonate powder (without added Vitamin D3, since UVB lighting provides D3 naturally) three to four times per week. Over-supplementing D3 through diet when UVB is also provided can cause toxicity. A reptile multivitamin can be added once weekly.

Handling and Taming

Baby iguanas are often defensive, fast, and prone to using their tail as a whip, their claws to scratch, and their teeth to bite. This is not unusual. It is the behavior of a small prey animal that is terrified. The path from a defensive hatchling to a calm, handleable adult iguana is measured in months and years of consistent, patient work. There are no shortcuts.

Daily short handling sessions, moving slowly and calmly, letting the iguana set the pace of trust-building, and never forcing interaction are the foundation. An iguana that is grabbed, restrained, or forced into handling will not learn to trust. It will learn that humans are threats, and unlearning that lesson takes far longer than building the trust correctly from the start.

Physical Safety With Adult Iguanas

A fully grown male iguana can inflict a serious bite wound, a whip from the tail that raises welts or breaks skin, and deep scratches from powerful claws. This is not said to discourage ownership but to make clear that safe handling technique matters. Always approach calmly. Support the full body. Be aware of the tail position. During breeding season, males become significantly more territorial and aggressive, even with owners they normally tolerate well. Breeding season aggression is hormonally driven and requires extra patience and caution.

Shedding

Iguanas shed in patches rather than in one piece. Juveniles shed more frequently than adults. Signs include dull skin, faded coloration, and restlessness. Regular bathing supports clean shedding. Never pull at retained shed. Retained shed on the toes and tail tip can constrict circulation and cause tissue loss. Soak in warm water and gently assist with loosening if needed. See a vet if pieces cannot be safely removed.

Common Health Issues

Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD)

Caused by inadequate UVB or calcium deficiency. Signs include soft jaw and limb bones, tremors, difficulty walking, spinal deformities, and pathological fractures. Entirely preventable with correct lighting and diet. Correct UVB and supplementation from day one is the only way to prevent it.

Renal Failure (Kidney Disease)

Common in iguanas fed animal protein, chronically dehydrated, or supplemented excessively with Vitamin D3. Signs include lethargy, weight loss, loss of appetite, and swelling. One of the leading causes of death in captive iguanas. Prevent by feeding a strictly herbivorous diet and providing consistent access to fresh water and bathing.

Gout

Caused by uric acid crystal buildup in joints and organs, typically from protein overfeeding or chronic dehydration. Signs include swollen, painful joints, lethargy, and difficulty moving. Requires veterinary management.

Respiratory Infections

Often caused by temperatures too low or humidity imbalances. Signs include open-mouth breathing, wheezing, nasal discharge, and lethargy. Requires veterinary treatment and husbandry correction.

Parasites

Both internal (roundworms, protozoa) and external (mites) parasites are common. Signs include weight loss despite eating, abnormal stools, lethargy, and visible mites on the skin. A fecal exam upon acquisition and annually thereafter is recommended.

Rostral Abrasions

Iguanas that repeatedly rub their nose against the enclosure glass or screen develop painful abrasions on the snout. Caused by the iguana not recognizing the barrier and attempting to push through it. Reduce reflection with visual barriers and ensure the iguana has enough space and enrichment to reduce repetitive pacing.

Tail Injuries

Iguana tails can be injured or dropped as a defense mechanism. Unlike some lizards, iguanas do not regenerate tails well. Tail injuries require veterinary assessment. Handle carefully and never restrain by the tail.

Things Every New Iguana Owner Should Know

Plan for a room-sized enclosure before you adopt.

A baby iguana in a 20-gallon tank is temporary. An adult needs custom-built housing that most people have not planned for. Build or commission the adult enclosure before or very shortly after adoption, not years down the road.

Taming takes years, not weeks.

Consistent, daily, calm work over months and years is what produces a tame adult iguana. There is no shortcut. The work is worth it, but go in with realistic expectations.

Animal protein will damage their kidneys.

Green iguanas are strict herbivores. Insects, meat, dog food, and cat food cause progressive kidney damage. This is not a guideline. It is a biological reality.

UVB is as important as food.

An iguana without proper UVB will develop metabolic bone disease. Replace the bulb every 6 months. Mount it correctly. Do not use coil or compact bulbs.

Breeding season changes male behavior significantly.

Adult male iguanas become territorial, aggressive, and unpredictable during breeding season. Even a normally calm male may display toward and attempt to bite its owner. This is hormonal, not personal, and it passes. Extra caution and respect for the animal's space is needed during this time.

Never release an iguana into the wild.

Iguanas released outside are invasive in warm climates and will die in Wisconsin winters. Surrender to a rescue if you can no longer care for yours.

This is a 15 to 20 year commitment.

An iguana adopted today may outlive your current living situation, relationship, or job. Plan for the full scope of what you are taking on.

Find an exotic vet experienced with iguanas before you need one.

Iguana medicine is specialized. Locate a vet before an emergency occurs.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you throughout your iguana ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.