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Tuesday, September 2, 2008

Crawly, scaly reptiles can make and great pets

As with any animal, make

sure you understand what's involved before getting involved.

By **LINDA LOMBARDI**

For The Associated Press
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BEARDED DRAGON: This is an Australian variety.

KEVIN HANLEY, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Americans own more pet reptiles than ever before. Brian Potter, co-owner of the North American Reptile Breeders Conference trade shows, thinks he knows why.

"It goes back to when you were a little kid – everybody likes dinosaurs," he says. "You get to own little dinosaurs."

Reptile ownership in the United States has grown 22 percent in the past two years, according to a survey by Ipsos for the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. It helps that reptiles can fit more easily into the busy lives of people who don't have time to walk a dog or entertain a cat.

Once Mom gets over having to feed mice to the snake, says Potter, "she comes back a week later and says this is the best pet I've ever had."

If you're looking for something scaly and interesting, one of the best ways to start is a reptile show, where you can find a wide variety of animals and supplies. These now take place on a regular basis all over the country: Potter's organization alone holds four, including one this weekend in Anaheim.

Reputable shows allow only captive-bred animals to be sold. That means not only that you don't have to worry about the possible environmental impact of taking reptiles from the wild, but also that it's easier for a novice owner.

Species that are bred are most suitable for beginners, since they're the ones that do best in captivity. And the animals are healthier, without the parasites that they typically carry in the wild. They're also used to eating food that you can realistically provide.

"One of the main problems with people owning reptiles is feeding," says Holli Friedland, director of the Mid-Atlantic Reptile show, scheduled for later this month in Timonium, Md. "A lot of wild snakes don't eat rodents – they eat toads or frogs or something that's not easy to get in the pet trade."

Since even captive reptiles can sometimes be fussy eaters, if you buy direct from a breeder, you'll know exactly what it's been eating and how often, says Friedland.

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Breeding also means selecting for attractive characteristics. At a show, there won't be just the one or two snakes that your pet store might have, but many vendors competing to offer the most interesting animals, such as hundreds of colors of corn snakes, Potter says.

Then there are the supplies: Reptile shows offer a wide variety, including high-end enclosures that are far more attractive than the traditional aquarium tank.

But perhaps the biggest advantage of a show is the chance to comparison shop not just the animals, but the vendors. Reptiles can be bought online, and many tolerate shipping well. But as with all animals, unfortunately, some dealers are more responsible than others – and it's hard for a novice to judge.

A good show will work to weed out the unscrupulous. Friedland's show has inspectors that move around the site and require vendors to remove unhealthy or otherwise suspect animals. Be suspicious of especially low prices, she warns. Wild-caught animals will be cheaper, because the vendor didn't have to do the hard, time-consuming work of incubating eggs and raising babies.

You don't need to be an expert to check the basics: cleanliness, bright eyes, no bones sticking out, no mites, no animals crowded together in one container.

Whatever the animal, a good breeder is generous with information, and should want to make sure that you know what you're doing before you take your pet home. Ask questions, and expect questions to be asked of you.

"The breeders that don't want to talk to you, let you handle, explain it to you – move on," says Potter. "If they're not feeling you out, they're just trying to get that buck out of your pocket; move on."

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