

Roger's Aquatics & Pet Supplies: Ball Pythons

Python regius is among the most, if not the most popular pet snake around today. They are a relatively small species, with males typically reaching 2 – 3 feet and females typically reaching 3 – 5 feet. They can live into their 30s with proper care. They are native to central and western Africa, where they spend much of their time hiding from the world. Being such a shy animal, their first instinct is to “ball up”, rather than strike, making them a great beginning snake. Lots of work has been done by breeders to create tons of different morphs, in all sorts of patterns and colours. These animals are nocturnal, meaning they come out during the night.

Enclosure: Size, Substrate, and Accessories

An adult ball python can be housed comfortably in a minimum of a 40 gallon tank (36” long by 18” wide by 18” tall). 75 gallon tanks (48” long by 18” wide by 20” tall) are also good, especially for adult females which are larger. Babies can sometimes becoming stressed in such a large environment, so it is recommended to keep them in something much smaller to start, such as a 15 gallon (24” long by 12” wide by 12” tall) or a 20 gallon (30” long by 12” wide by 12” high). You can choose to keep a ball python in a larger enclosure than what is necessary, but it is important to provide many hiding places for them. All enclosures should be secured with cage clips and if possible, have some sort of weight placed on them. Ball pythons can very easily push off a lid if it is not secured properly, and it can be quite a job finding them sometimes. One clip should be attached in each corner of the tank.

Aspen, paper based beddings, or wood chips (such as Zoo Med’s Forest Floor or Exo Terra’s Forest Bark) are all appropriate substrate choices. Cedar should never be used as it is toxic to reptiles.

Every ball python tank should include two hides, one on each side so the snake can still hide while thermoregulating. Some keepers choose to make one of these hides a “humid hide”, which mimics an underground burrow and can help the snake while it’s shedding. We have had good success using moss in these types of hides. We also feel that it is important to provide a rougher piece of décor, such as a branch or a cork flat, to help the snake pull off its skin while shedding. Fake plants help create a more natural environment, and add even more places for the snake to hide, at least when they’re still on the smaller side. Always offer a water dish for them as well. The size is up to you – ball python’s will sometimes use the opportunity to soak, and it’s good for keeping up humidity, but it is not necessary to have one overly large. The water should be replaced every second day, and bleached once a week to prevent the growth of bacteria.

Lighting and Heat

Ball pythons should be maintained with a basking area between 88 – 96 F during the day on one side of the enclosure. Many breeders seem to keep them at exactly 92 F, but as long as they are maintained within this range they should thrive. This temperature can be achieved using a heat pad hooked up to a thermostat, or with a lamp with an appropriate wattage ceramic heat emitter, infrared bulb, or daytime basking bulb. Heat pads are preferred as they will not dry up your tank as much as a heat lamp will, and seems to be preferred by the snakes themselves. The opposite end of the tank should be maintained between 78 – 80 F. Generally, no additional heating should be required to maintain the tank at this temperature, but if it is needed then the same rules for types of heating apply. Night time temperatures should never fall below 75 F. Again, no additional heating should be required to maintain the tank at this temperature, but if it is needed then the same rules for types of heating apply.

Always make sure you have an accurate thermometer (digital is always better) to measure your temps. Temperature is very important for reptiles, and if it is not within the proper ranges, your reptile may not eat, or if it is too hot you could burn or even kill your snake.

Diet

Young ball pythons should be fed on a once a week basis, and ideally only one prey item per feeding. Adults can be fed every two weeks. All prey items should be as big as largest area of snake. Rats are preferred over mice, as they are nutritionally better for them. They also get much larger, making them more appropriate for larger snakes. Ball pythons can also be fed African soft furred rats, but they can get addicted to them easily as they are their natural prey. Frozen/thawed rodents are preferred, especially since prey items from hopper and up for mice, and small rats and up for rats can do some serious damage (even death in extreme cases) to your snake. It is also nice to be able to stock up a month's worth or more of food so you don't have to make weekly trips to the store. There are a couple ways to defrost rodents. Firstly, they can be thawed in your refrigerator. Usually it is easiest to place the rodent in the fridge over night, but if you do it the same day, a mouse should thaw within 2 hours, and a rat in 4 – 5 hours, depending on temperature of fridge and size of prey. It's best to rebag the rodent from the bag it was sent home in and place it in a designated rat defrosting container/bowl/thing so as not to contaminate your own food and compromise your health. Remember, these rodents are frozen along with whatever was in their intestines at the time. Rodents can also be thawed in cold water. A prey item can be placed in a leak-proof bag and floated in the water until it defrosts. After the rodent is defrosted using your preferred method, the rodent needs to be warmed. This can be done by either placing the rodent (still in a bag) in a warm but not hot container of water until it has a temperature as close to a live rodent as possible. We have also had success warming prey items under heat lamps with careful monitoring – overheating can invite unwelcome bacteria, and cooked rats are not a pleasant thing to deal with. The common mistakes with feeding f/t rodents are thawing out in a temperature that is too warm, microwaving them, and refreezing refused prey items. However, if your feeding plans change and you have thawed the prey out in the refrigerator and have not removed it from there yet, it can be refrozen. During the actual feeding, you may have to wiggle the rodent by its tail using tongs in order to entice the snake, although we have seen some that will eat f/t rats without doing this. If for some reason your snake absolutely refuses to eat frozen, always make sure you stay with the snake until the rodent is dead, and be prepared to intervene if the rodent begins to attack. It's helpful to have a set of tongs or even a snake hook with you, so you can either remove the rodent, remove the snake, or if the snake has grabbed the rodent but did not wrap around its body properly, block the rodent from reaching your snake.

Hunger strikes are very common with ball pythons but it is not always a cause for worry. When this happens, the first step is to double check your temperatures and humidity levels. Assuming everything is in order, and that your snake is not in shed, the next step would be to closely monitor the snake. Your snake should not lose a significant amount of weight during a hunger strike, if it does, a vet check may be needed. You should also continue to offer prey on a weekly basis. It's a good idea to keep track of your snakes feeding and shedding activities, so you can ensure that they are growing properly and make sure they eat with some regularity.

Many ball pythons are far more comfortable eating in their cage than outside, but there are some reasons that you may choose to feed in a designated feeding tub. Sometimes, feeding is messy, so it's nice to be able to quickly wipe up a tub rather than cleaning out a cage. It also prevents any possible ingestion of substrate. With picky eaters, it is best to just feed them in the tank.

Hydration and Humidity

The humidity in a ball python enclosure should be maintained between 50 – 60%, with spikes of up to 80% during shedding. Open screen tops let a lot of this humidity escape, so covering the majority of tank top with glass or plexiglass can do wonders. Daily misting can help maintain the humidity, but is not always necessary. Always have a humidity gauge (digital is much more accurate) to monitor the humidity so you can spray if necessary. As said before, you should always offer a water dish for them as well. The size is up to you – ball python's will sometimes use the opportunity to soak, and it's good for keeping up humidity, but it is not necessary to have one overly large.

Cohabitation

Ball pythons are a solitary species, and cohabitating them is not recommended. For one thing, cannibalism, while not common, can happen and has been documented. Having more than one also causes stress on each other, as they have no purpose to be near one and other unless it's for breeding. It would be like having an unwanted roommate with you at all times, that you could never get away from. They will also compete for the best hides and best heat sources, meaning one will always be disadvantaged to the other. It is also hard to keep track of who is pooping, and if a mouse is regurgitated, who did it. And if one gets sick, the other is pretty much guaranteed to get sick as well, costing you double the vet bills, double the meds, and causing double the stress. Your snakes could also potentially breed, and you will have not done any preparation for this – no space to raise the babies, no incubator, not a big enough budget to feed the babies, no vet budget if there are any complications – the list could go on.

Sexing

Typically, females are longer and thicker than the males, but this is not always an accurate way to sex snakes, especially when they are young. The only way for an average owner to properly sex a snake is to bring it to the vet and have it probed. Other methods of sexing can either be risky and should only be left to professional breeders, or have no real accuracy to them and will not be discussed here.

Checklist of Supplies

- ✓ Appropriate size tank for your size snake
- ✓ Substrate
 - Aspen
 - Paper based bedding
 - Wood chips
- ✓ Two or more hides, small enough for the snake to touch all sides
- ✓ Water dish
- ✓ Hygrometer
- ✓ Thermometer
- ✓ Snake hook
- ✓ Heat pad or heat lamp with appropriate wattage bulb
 - Thermostat is a must if using heat pad
- ✓ Rough piece of décor to help in shedding
- ✓ Spray bottle
- ✓ Secure tank lid with a minimum of four clips