

Keeping Different Herps and Reptiles in the Same Cage

Can you put chameleons, bearded dragons and tree frogs in the same cage together?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

My box turtle is peeling his skin, and I read in the book I got about them that that is not ok for them to do. It says that he is getting too much vitamin D3 and not enough vitamin A. Do you know what fruits and vegetables contain that vitamin? I've tried strawberries, but he doesn't like them.

Can you put chameleons and tree frogs in the same cage together? I've also heard that you're not supposed to hold chameleons all that much. Is that true? Also my dumb boyfriend is wanting to buy a bearded dragon, and he wants to keep it at my house. The only problem is he is trying to put it in the same cage as the chameleons and tree frogs. Even though the cage is big enough, I want to know if it is OK to do.

I am so glad you wrote in to ask me about this. While it is very cool to have a mixed herpetarium with different species, one must always ensure that those reptiles and/or amphibians are compatible and that the environmental conditions are suitable for the different creatures.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for a tree frog, box turtle, chameleon and bearded dragon. Bearded dragons are from arid desert areas in Australia. They require high heat and low humidity, and their daytime temperature range is 75 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit with a focal hot spot of 110 degrees F. Being amphibians, tree frogs require higher humidity and a cooler environment. If you tried to keep the temperature range high enough for the beardie, you would end up dehydrating your tree frog, resulting in its untimely demise. I don't know what kind of tree frog you have, so I cannot offer more specific recommendations. It would be safest to house your chameleons and tree frogs in separate habitats.

Chameleons are happiest -- if we can use that term -- and do best when housed as solitary creatures. For the most part, chameleons are only combined for breeding purposes, yet for convenience, many breeders house hatchlings and juveniles together. This is a temporary situation. When I read your letter, you said "chameleons," so I wonder if you are housing more than one chameleon per enclosure. If so, you should consider other options. It may be possible to house several juvenile chameleons in a large habitat with dense plants. This provides them with hiding spots, visual barriers and places of escape, but this should still be considered a temporary fix. Chameleons should be housed separately as they mature.

Even though chameleons appear gentle and tame, it is generally believed that handling is very stressful to them. When stressed, some creatures will lash out, bite, kick, whip their tails or hiss, but many chameleons won't show any outwards signs of stress when handled. That doesn't mean they are not affected by it. Handling should be kept to a minimum. It is possible to injure a chameleon by pulling it off a branch. A claw could get damaged or even ripped off. The injury often becomes infected and causes soft tissue and/or bone infections, which can be very serious.

I also don't recommend purchasing a new reptile and just plopping it into an enclosure with other established residents. It is very important that new acquisitions should be quarantined to prevent the introduction of disease to the animals already in residence. Also, during quarantine, new herps should be examined and tested by a qualified herp vet to ensure they are healthy. This way any necessary treatments can be administered during quarantine.

Now onto your box turtle questions. All reptiles lose their skin periodically. Chelonians (turtles, terrapins and tortoises) continually shed their skin in pieces or sheets, so the peeling you describe may be normal.

If you have any concerns about your box turtle, schedule an appointment with a herp veterinarian in your area to have him examined. As for feeding him, your box turtle will benefit from consuming a commercial box turtle pelleted diet, which should provide a balanced variety of nutrients. Also add nutritious vegetables, a small amount of fruits and a few insects (snails, slugs, mealworms, crayfish, frogs, tadpoles, lizards, fish, earthworms or crickets) several times per week.

You didn't say what kind of box turtle you have, so I can't give you specific help regarding husbandry and the like. If the peeling skin is see-through and coming off in little chunks, then that is probably normal. However, if the skin underneath is red, thickened or abnormal in any way, or if your turtle has an odor to it, then a herp veterinarian should examine him as soon as possible.

Box turtles usually exhibit vitamin A deficiency with swollen eyes. Box turtle pellets should contain adequate amounts of either vitamin A or beta carotene, which turtles convert into vitamin A. I doubt your box turtle is suffering from an overabundance of vitamin D3. Unfortunately, you can't trust everything you read. Beta carotene can be found in dark green leafy vegetables, orange vegetables (sweet potato, carrots, bell peppers) and green, red and orange fruits.

Please don't let your boyfriend attempt to house a new baby bearded dragon with chameleons and tree frogs. It's a bad combination because they all require different habitat temperature and humidity parameters.