

Don't Forget the Newts

By Russ Case

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The red eft newt is the terrestrial version of the eastern newt.

The Chinese fire-bellied newt is commonly available in pet and fish stores.

Photo by Dick Bartlett People who want to submit articles to REPTILES are always pitching ideas to me regarding lizards, snakes and turtles and tortoises. Very rarely does anyone surface who wants to write an article about newts. I can almost consider these animals, as well as salamanders, as the unsung members of the herp community.

This isn't to say that absolutely nobody works with them; there are breeders who raise newts and salamanders. But these amphibians certainly don't figure as prominently in stores and at expos as reptiles do. Those deli cups crowding reptile expo tables more often house geckos, milksnakes and other lizards and snakes, and not newts and salamanders.

As far as pet newts are concerned, the one newt mainstay species that comes to mind is the red-spotted newt (*Notophthalmus v. viridescens*). Also known generally as the eastern newt, it can often be found in pet stores as well as tropical fish stores. Eastern newts are interesting creatures. They are typically olive-colored with red spots, but there is a land-dwelling version called the red eft. As its name implies it is entirely red. In nature bright coloration on an animal often means it's toxic or dangerous (I'm thinking of everything from a poison dart frog to a mandrill's face, and mandrills can be pretty darn dangerous). The red eft is no different in this regard, and while it isn't venomous it does harbor skin gland secretions that are off-putting to would-be predators. Simply put, red efts taste foul (not that I have personally sampled any).

Another popular pet newt is the Chinese fire-bellied newt (*Cynops orientalis*). "Fire-bellied" is an adjective that pretty much covers it all without leaving anything to the imagination. These dark-on-top bright-red-on-bottom newts share their common name with the popular Oriental fire-bellied toad (*Bombina orientalis*), a favorite anuran that can be found in many collections. Like the eastern newts (and all newts) the fire-bellied newts is mostly aquatic.

The fact that newts are aquatic plays a large role in someone's decision to keep them. Any time you're keeping aquatic animals you're dealing with tanks of water and the resulting cleanliness issues that can crop up. This may mean filters and other apparatus that you don't need to bother with when keeping land-dwelling reptiles come into play. Some people don't bother with newts for this reason, figuring that it's easier to maintain reptiles that don't need such equipment.

One of my favorite newts is the Mandarin newt, also known as the emperor newt (*Tylototriton shanjing*). This species is fairly toxic, not that it would harm someone who wanted to keep it, unless you tried to eat it. When squeezed, as by a predator, its ribs will puncture glands found along its back (visible as orange "warts"). This releases the toxin. Emperor newts are more terrestrial than the other species mentioned.

Speaking of the terrestrial habits of the emperor newts, I can recall another dark moment in my herpkeeping endeavors that involved a couple of these newts. I set up a very nice vivarium, mixing land and water areas. It had a waterfall and everything. Remember, when setting up any type of aquatic area for any animal (other than fish), be sure to provide an easy way for the animal to get out of the water. The water area in my vivarium was more like a well than a swimming hole. And sure enough, my two emperor newts entered the water and were not able to get back out. Both drowned. It's good to learn a lesson, but would be nice if a pet doesn't have to die in order to do so. That's one reason why I'm so happy to be the editor of REPTILES magazine. I like to think that over the years it has helped herpers, especially younger ones, avoid some of the mistakes I made in my younger days. Those two drowned emperor newts really bummed me out, and I still kick myself when thinking back to what happened to them.

I mentioned water cleanliness previously, and if you plan to keep newts you have to stay on top of this. Newts are in the water nearly all of the time. They will come out occasionally, so at least a small land area should be provided. But they definitely remain in the water the vast majority of the time, and dirty water can lead to newt illness.

Newts will eat insects, worms, beef heart and other meaty morsels. The life cycle of a newt is similar to that of a frog.

Eggs are laid in the water, larvae come next and the larvae develop into adult newts. For an article about breeding Chinese fire-bellied newts, [click here](#). You can also read an interesting article about German amphibians, including newts, [click here](#).

This was the “newt blog.” Next time maybe I’ll write the “salamander blog.”

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