

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE TARANTULA KEEPING HOBBY *by Todd Gearheart*

So you want to join the fastest growing pet hobby of the 1990s ? You've seen them in movies and in pet stores. Recent books and magazines are showing more and more photos of them and featuring articles about them. The Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and TBS's National Explorer TV programs are showing documentaries about them. You've heard all the bizarre stories that they are ugly, deadly , can jump 20 feet and are jet black and hairy, BUT is all this true? Curiosity has brought you this far. Let's get the facts out and give you the basics about the hobby.

What is a Tarantula ?

A Tarantula is a very primitive spider that hasn't evolved much and is usually larger and more hairy than true spiders. Their fangs work in an up-and-down motion and they have four lungs. True spider's fangs work like scissors and have two lungs. They are more efficient and evolved animals than tarantulas.

Why keep them? They are fascinating animals with their unique behaviours, colours and patterns. They don't take up much space, they don't make much mess, aren't expensive to feed, live very long lives, are not dangerous and they are truly nature's jewellery.

Quick history of the hobby:

The hobby was pretty much started and became popular in the 1970's with the import and selling of the classic - the Mexican redknee, *Brachypelma smithi*. The 1990's has been an explosive decade for the hobby as over 200 different species have been imported or captive bred, and now there are species that appeal to every collector in colour, habitat type, size, and temperament.

Best beginner tarantulas: (because they are hardy and docile more than others)

- 1) Brazilian Black - *Grammostola pulchra*
- 2) Mexican redknee - *Brachypelma smithi*
- 3) Chilean Common - *Grammostola rosea* and 3Chilean rose2 *Grammostola cala*
- 4) Pink zebra beauty - *Eupalaestrus tenuitarsus*
- 5) Pinktoe - *Avicularia avicularia*
- 6) Curly Hair - *Brachypelma albopilosum*

Tarantulas of the genera *Brachypelma*, *Grammostola*, *Aphonopelma*, *Eupalaestrus* and some species of *Avicularia* are generally considered to be docile. Keep in mind, some species and even individuals within those species can be skittish and/or aggressive.

Bad tarantulas for beginners:

Most African and Asian and even some large South American Tarantulas are not good choices for beginners. They are too fast, hard to keep, some are very large, aggressive, nervous and some have a bad bite. Stay away from obtaining these species until you have acquired lots of experience , reading, research and communication with experienced keeper's of these species under your belt. In particular, the following genera are NOT recommended for beginner's:

Poecilotheria, *Pterinochilus*, *Stromatopelma*, *Heteroscodra*, *Hysterocrates*, *Selencosmia*, *Acanthoscurria*, *Haplopelma*, and *Sericopelma*.

What do you keep them in?

Most adult tarantulas can be kept in 10 gallon tanks with four-six inches of peat moss and vermiculite for a ground substrate, a cork bark shelter to hide under, and a shallow water dish. Know your species. They can be arboreal, burrowing or forest floor wandering. They are found in deserts, savannah plains, lowland rainforest and cool, montane mountains. Find out more about the type of species you are keeping and about its habitat to know how to keep it successfully.

What do you feed them? Adult tarantulas feed on crickets and super worms; large species can eat new-born mice

and small anole lizards. In most cases, feeding them once a week a couple of the above listed prey is fine. When and how often do you have to clean their home? With a good routine of feeding them once a week and throwing out their left over dinners the next day, you should only have to clean out your tarantula's tank once every six months.

Can or should I handle a tarantula? NO! Tarantulas should only be handled by professionals with lots of experience. They are not really pets, but display animals much like keeping fish in a tank. They don't have a need for it and don't understand it like a cat, dog or mammal would. There is no such thing as taming a tarantula. These are very primitive animals. They have no idea what handling is and most tarantulas can be injured from falling off your hand. If you only want to get a tarantula to hold and show off to your friends, you are getting into the hobby for the wrong reason. Please do not handle tarantulas when you are a beginner!!!

Are they dangerous?

No one has ever died from a tarantula bite. Most tarantulas are reluctant to bite and would rather run away from you, BUT they do have large fangs and if they were to bite, it would feel like a bad bee sting unless you were allergic to their venom. There are some species like *Poecilotheria*, *Stromatopelma*, *Pterinochilus*, *Heteroscodra* and *Acanthoscurria* that have medically significant bites.

Rules of thumb: Don't handle them!, know everything about the species that you are keeping, and never lose respect for the animal.

Captive Breeding:

After keeping several species and reading several of the good books on Tarantula breeding, you might want to try this. Captive breeding is very desirable as it keeps us from having to collect species from the wild in large numbers. Record Keeping: Keep records on when you acquired your tarantula, from whom, how much did you pay, moult dates, breeding notes, etc. It is very important to assign stock numbers to keep separate blood lines for breeding later also.

How can I find out more?

Attend the S.W. Florida Tarantula Society (SWFTS) meetings and become an active member.

- (1) Join the **British Tarantula Society** and receive their informative and educational Journal.
- (2) Subscribe to **WEBBING'S** invertebrate magazine.
- (3) Obtain and read the following recommended books:

Sam Marshall's: Tarantulas and Other Arachnids

Stanley and Marguerite Schultz's: The Tarantula Keeper's Guide.

Ronald Baxter's: Keeping and Breeding Tarantulas in Captivity.

Andreas Tinter's: Tarantulas Today.

Subscribe to the Arachnid Mailing List on the internet.

Any questions, contact Todd Gearheart at email: tgearhea@peganet.com