



The reptiles in your store need proper care—as do the insects they eat. Learn what temperatures, foods and bedding are appropriate so you don't add a kink to the food chain.

Keeping Live Foods Alive

Feeder insects aren't big moneymakers, but healthy batches of insects will draw customers to your store like moths to a flame. By Jennifer Pinkley

Insects that serve as tasty, crunchy treats for reptiles often are an afterthought in many pet stores, even though the bugs can be great investments. If you sell reptiles in your pet store, you can get the most out of these tiny critters by doing three things.

First, make sure you know how to properly care for each type of insect you sell. Second, be aware of common care and feeding mistakes many store owners make. And third, understand that insects can play a much bigger role in your business than you might think.

Here's a breakdown of those three steps, with details on the insects you're most likely to stock.

Treat Your Insects Well

If you sell feeder insects, or are thinking of adding them to your inventory, the first step is getting ready to properly care

for and feed your insect stock. Find some good resources on care and feeding for each type of insect you want to sell and make sure you have a good storage setup before you place your first order.

There are about five common feeder insects, and companies like Timberline Live Pet Foods (Marion, Ill.) provide

helpful husbandry information on their websites.

- **Crickets.** The primary food source for a wide range of reptiles, crickets are insects you should surely know how not only to care for, but allow to thrive.

Proper housing includes containers with good ventilation and slippery sides so the crickets can't climb out. The container size depends on the number of crickets you plan to keep, so ask your distributor for tips before you order. Separate containers are required for each size cricket you plan to stock.

Crickets are happy at room temperature, between 70 degrees and 75 degrees, at moderate humidity. Make sure they're stored away from direct sunlight, drafts and pesticides.

Crickets need access to water, often the trickiest part of caring for them. If you put it in bowls, they could drown in it. If food gets mixed with the water, the cricket enclosure will start to smell bad—and who wants a smelly insect house on the sales floor? Avoid problems by using widely available “water pellets,” such as Timberline's Easy Water, to provide water in an edible form.

Prevent bacteria by providing only cricket food, not fresh fruit or vegetables, and by cleaning the cricket enclosures thoroughly each time you get a new shipment—preferably with a mild bleach solution.

- **Mealworms.** High-protein mealworms are a popular treat for many types of pets. Many worms, including those mentioned in this article, eat their bedding. That means it's important to use appropriate substances like wheat bran, oat bran or dry oatmeal.

“If you're not committed to taking care of your insects, you will get in and out of that part of the supply business because you will get frustrated with it, or the insects will make your store smell horrible if you don't take care of them.”

—Todd Goodman,
Timberline general manager

Mealworm containers need several air holes. The worms should be stored in the refrigerator at between 42 F and 55 F.

Every two weeks, remove the worms from the refrigerator, add a water pellet or small piece of vegetable, and let them warm up and feed. After 24 hours, remove the food and water and put them back in the fridge.

- **Waxworms.** A fatty treat for reptiles, waxworms require little care, but the right temperature is critical. They should be stored as close to 55 F as possible, warmer than most refrigerators. The butter tray is usually the best place to keep the container you're storing them in, but check the temperature first. If your refrigerator doesn't have an area that's around 55 F, it's better to store them at room temperature than to keep them colder than 40 F.

These worms actually live off of stored fat, so they don't need any food or water, but be sure they're stored in low humidity and that their bedding doesn't get wet.

- **Superworms.** Terrific treats for larger reptiles, superworms require a little more care than others. The most important care requirement is to store them at a warm temperature, between 70 F and 80 F.

Keep them in an uncovered container about the size of a small cat litter box. If you do want a lid, use a screen to ensure adequate ventilation. Add about 2 inches of bedding, then the worms, then another half an inch of bedding.

Add a water source every few days, such as water pellets or small pieces of cucumber. Keep an eye on the bedding



A good treat for larger reptiles, superworms should be layered between bedding—2 inches on the bottom, and another half an inch on top of the worms. Bedding should be replaced about once a month.

and add more every few weeks to make sure there is always about 2.5 inches. Completely clean and replace the bedding about once a month.

- **Fruit flies.** Great for small reptiles, fruit flies require almost no care. Follow any special instructions from your vendor, which usually means storing the flies at room temperature in a container with a food source. Cooler temperatures will slow down fly reproduction while very warm temperatures may cause the food medium to get moldy.

Avoid Common Care Mistakes

The most common mistakes shop and pet owners make with feeder insects is

not following basic care instructions, said Todd Goodman, general manager of Timberline.

"Just like any other animal in store, they need proper care," said Goodman. "If you're not committed to taking care of your insects, you will get in and out of that part of the supply business because you will get frustrated with it, or the insects will make your store smell horrible if you don't take care of them."

Two very common mistakes are not housing different-sized crickets in different-sized bins and not giving crickets enough living space, said Bill Wright, owner of the American Cricket Ranch (Lakeside, Calif.).

Cricket Paralysis Virus

THE CRICKET INDUSTRY has been hit hard by a deadly disease—one you need to understand so you can answer your customers' questions and keep it out of your store.

Cricket paralysis virus originated in Europe about 10 years ago and affects the common brown cricket, the only cricket available as a pet food. The virus is so deadly that common brown crickets in the European pet industry are pretty much gone, according to Bob Eldred, general manager of Top Hat Cricket Farm Inc. (Portage, Mich.).

There are a couple things to be aware of as this virus continues to impact cricket farming operations in the United States. One concern among pet owners involves how the disease spreads, Eldred said.

"The virus only affects the one species of cricket; it will not transfer to reptiles or other animals," he said. The virus is not airborne, but can stick to surfaces for months and still make crickets sick if they're introduced to a contaminated container.

Here are some steps you can take to mitigate the risks in your store:

- **Pick one supplier.** Reduce the chances of acquiring contaminated crickets by getting them from just one source, if you can, Eldred said. Sticking to only one supplier may pose a challenge, though, since there has already been a bit of a cricket shortage. And it

could get even worse: Todd Goodman, general manager of Timberline Live Pet Foods (Marion, Ill.) thinks the shortage might reach an unprecedented level this year.

- **Ask pointed questions.** Your cricket suppliers should be able to tell you their process for keeping their cricket stock uninfected.

"I make the mill that creates my feed sign off on a set of protocols that say they've gone back several levels to make sure there's no connection between them and another cricket farm and us," said Goodman. "It's OK for one of my pet stores to ask, 'How do I know you're not sending me infected crickets?'"

Timberline has worked to become a self-contained facility that produces everything it sells; it does not have any inbound live goods. In addition, the company has instituted very strict disinfection protocols to keep the virus out of its facility.

The bottom line is to figure out what suppliers are doing to keep the virus out of their operations, and choose a supplier you trust and feel comfortable with.

- **Keep your in-store cricket housing clean.** "To keep feeders alive and healthy and virus-free, a clean environment for them is a must," said Eldred. Clean cages regularly with a bleach solution, especially between shipments.

—Jennifer Pinkley

Other common problems involve food: not providing adequate food and water, providing too much water or setting up food and water in a way that the food gets wet.

When cricket food gets wet, it gets pretty smelly. In many cases, store owners make the mistake of removing the food, water or both to get rid of the smell. That will get rid of the smell, but it also will eliminate the nutrients crickets need to be healthy food for reptiles, Goodman said. A better solution is water gel pellets.

Finally, make sure not to use any kind of bedding in cricket containers. Bedding also can promote bacterial growth and can contribute to smelly containers.

Other types of feeder insects are pretty easy to care for. However, if you store worms in the wrong bedding, keep them at the wrong temperature, or put them in the wrong place in the refrigerator, they won't do well or will even die.

If you're new to keeping insects like mealworms, Wright suggested oatmeal or wheat bran as insect bedding. Carefully review care instructions for each type of insect before you place an order so you understand how to store and feed them correctly. If you're unsure about how care for your insects, just ask your supplier for detailed instructions.



House crickets in appropriately sized bins. Two of the most common mistakes are not matching the cricket size with the correct container, and not giving them enough living space.

tip

Set up a “feeder area” that shows off the different insects you offer. If you store your crickets and worms in a back room, set up a small display with empty cups and photos to help customers visualize the variety of insects you sell.

Use Insects to Improve Business

Do you consider your feeder insects good marketing tools? If not, you should.

People who own cats or dogs will visit your store every three to five weeks to buy pet food but, as Goodman points out, reptile owners will visit your store every three to five days to buy feeder insects. And reptile owners who are in your store buying insects might see a terrarium accessory that catches their attention, or supplies for their other pets.

“People just don't realize the market potential of selling feeder insects,” said Goodman.

The first step in this marketing plan is to make customers aware of the feeder insects you sell. If the insects are stored in a back room, your customers might not even know the bugs are available.

“People will never buy your insects if they don't know what you're selling,” said Goodman. “Many times pet stores don't think of insects as something they market, but they'll bring people into the store more than almost anything else.”

Look at feeder insects as essential merchandise, Goodman said. Include informational signage like you would for other products with clear language and maybe some graphics. Timberline provides a free “What They Eat” chart that stores can display near reptile areas to educate customers about the different insects pets like to eat.

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Don't underestimate the pull that these little buggers can have. They might be creepy and they might be crawly—and in a normal setting bugs might send folks running for the hills—but feeder insects that are properly cared for and marketed can both draw traffic into your store and help new customers evolve into regulars.

“Feeder insects are traffic drivers,” said Goodman. “Even if you only make a few thousand dollars off of them over the year, it puts people in the store every few days. Few people who have reptiles go into a pet store less than once every seven days to buy insects.” ■

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