

General guide to buying a snake

First off this is only a guide and not the be all and end all in snake buying and is written from our personal experience.

Snakes can be a very rewarding addition to your family and a good choice if a member is allergic to mammal fur.

You or a family member has discovered snakes as beautiful, interesting or an unusual choice of pet and are looking to buy one. First check point to cover is research as there are many different types of snakes that differ in size [length /girth], temperament, active time [active during the day or night] and housing requirement [size of housing, high/low humidity, high/low temperatures and depth of substrate as some snakes like to burrow] and feeding [how big an food item, how often to feed].

It is up to you how to find the information out and there are a few different ways such as the internet, books, chatting with someone you know that has snakes or popping down to your local reptile shop [that might not be that local] and having a good long chat with a member of staff that should have years of experience with different types of snakes and be able to point you in the right direction on a snake that's right for your circumstance. They should also offer some handling time with different snakes. There are also many local societies of reptile lovers that get together once a month or so and have evenings of general reptile chat and handling sessions these may be handy to attend as there will be a wealth of experience on offer.

Once you have found the type of snake that you want to add to your life and have done a fair bit of research then next point to cover is where to buy from? Again there are a few different ways of going about it. If this is your first snake I would advise a reptile shop over getting one from the internet or through a friend or an advert in a paper, as you may have done research on your snake but without some practical experience [knowing a healthy snake when you see/hear about one, knowing a correct housing setup when you see/hear about one] you may not understand what you're getting yourself into.

A reptile shop

It would be lovely to think all reptile shops are in the business purely for the love of reptiles and are over all concerned with the health [physical and mental] of their livestock but sadly to say not all are. Things to look out for are the general health of the livestock on offer and this goes for any animal be it dog, cat, rodent, bird or reptile. Snake general health is different to other reptiles in that their anatomy is different, as snakes lack external ears, eye lids and limbs. A healthy snake should be of a good weight, the general rule is that the body is nicely rounded but not a perfectly round shape as this can be a sign of an overweight snake, signs of an underweight or dehydrated snake are that the body is peaked [more of an triangle shape] with the spine and ribs being prominent also wrinkling of the skin and scales. With other animals and reptiles a sign of good health would be clear and bright eyes, this can differ in snakes as when they are coming up to shed [out growing their old skin] their eyes turn a milky blue colour and this is completely normal. The other opening such as nostrils, mouth and vent [a slit like shape at the rear of the snake where faeces and ureter leave the body] should all be clear of discharge, if there is some then the snakes is suffering from some form of illness. If you feel the snake is unwell in any form chat to a member of staff, who should be happy to

explain as animals do get ill sometimes it is not always a sign of neglect but then an ill snake should not be on display and should be being treated for the illness. Other good health signs are tongue flicking as this is how snakes detect the world around them along with vision and normal movement of the head and body.

In a reptile shop you may not see the snakes as a good shop will have plenty of hides [shelter, cork bark] for the snake to retreat to as no animal will stay exposed all day. There should always be a water bowl in the enclosure as all animals need water on offer. If you want to see the snake a member of staff should be happy to get it out for you so you can check health and temperament. There are a few exceptions, the snake may have just been fed or is in the cloudy eye stage of shedding which can make them a wee bit grumpy as they can no see as well as normal. A member of staff should explain this and offer another time to check the snake over.

Housing there are a few different names for housing, cage, setup, tank but the one you want for snakes is a vivarium [viv] which is a wooden box with a glass front, and there are also glass tanks which are glass all over usually with a mesh top and glass doors that open outwards. These can be used for snakes but we personally think glass cannot hold the temperatures well enough to maintain the health of the snake.

The reptile shop should not let you take the snake and housing on the same day, they should advise you to buy the housing first. Most reptile shops will sell the vivarium with everything you need with it such as lighting, heating, hides, substrate, water bowl and thermometers so you can check the temperatures are holding steady to keep your snake healthy. They should also explain about the right size viv for your snake and if in the future you will have to upgrade to a bigger viv as some snakes get large 7ft plus. They should advise you take the viv home, set it up turn all the heating on and leave it for a day or two to make sure the temperatures are correct for both day and night. They may ask when you come back in to buy/collect the snake what the temperatures are holding they are within their rights to do this and if you got the viv somewhere else and are only buying the snake from them, they are within their rights to refuse the sale if they think the enclosure is inadequate.

When buying a snake especially a young or baby snake you must be sure it is feeding well and normally as some species of snake are known to be problem feeders when young [royal pythons] the shop should have a detailed feeding record for its younger snakes. To prove they are feeding normally if the shop is cagey about it or the young snake looks underweight don't take it out of pity as it takes time and experience to assist feed a baby snake and if you do not know how, it can be very stressful for the snake and yourself. We recommend at least 5 feeds on the trot to ensure the snake has the right start to life.

The staff should explain about feeding whether the snake you are buying is young or older and the general rule is once a week with an appropriate sized food item [mouse/rat] and that as the snake grows you will have to increase the size of food or else this could lead to stunting of the snake. The general guild to what size to feed your snake is a bit bigger than widest part of the snake's body which is its middle and you should see the food lump in the snake for a day after. The staff should explain how to defrost the food item as it will come frozen.

If you are getting more than one snake the staff should cover what this could mean as some snakes like corn snakes can live happily in a group as can most others expect for cannibalistic [eats other

snakes] snakes such as king snakes, in captivity they happily accept the normal defrosted mice/rats you will not have to feed them other snakes. But keeping them together can be a risk though it is usually a size issue so two kept together of a very similar size and well fed should not eat each other. If you get a male and female at a young age be aware that once they hit sexual maturity they will most likely breed and you will get babies gestation [time between mating and babies] depends on the type of snake also some snakes are live bearers [babies develop inside the mother and are pushed out much like mammal birth expect there will be a lot more of them] and other snakes lay eggs [the mother lays the eggs and the young will develop inside the eggs outside of the mother's body] find out what the type of the snake you're interested in is [egg or live] and the mating behaviour if you wish to breed, we do not recommend trying to breed your first snake. The staff should cover all this and more as there are differing schools of thought regarding keeping snakes together.

Buying online

There are many places to buy online whether it is an online reptile shop or reptile forum where breeders sell their surplus stock or a reptile rescue and rehoming site. Again this can be a double edged sword as you will only have pictures of the snake and a short write up about it to go by. If you have seen a snake you are interested in, message or ring the provider up to ask more questions and request an up to date photo. If they are on the level this should not be a problem and don't feel bad you are within your rights to ask. It is also a good idea to find out if the snake comes with an enclosure, professional breeders usually just have the snake on offer and trust that you have the correct housing setup and may ask if you do, they are within their rights to ask you. If you are just buying the snake you must have the set up ready at home with correct heating and lighting and hides and water bowl before you buy the snake.

Getting the snake with online buying, the snake maybe at the opposite end of the country to where you live and there are a few ways to get the snake, the seller may charge for a courier fee along with the price of the snake [the seller should sort out the courier if they are based miles and miles from where you are] or if closer you can go to them and collect the snake, with collection you may have to pay before going up or pay when you get there and check the snake over. I would advise holding off paying till you have seen the snake but this only applies to collection.

If buying from a rehoming site be aware that the snakes on offer may have issues such as stunting or some form of deformity much as if you buy dogs or cats from rehoming centres. This does not mean the snake is any less rewarding and on the other hand the snakes may be perfectly healthy and are being rehomed due to a change in circumstance again the snakes may not come with an enclosure so make sure you have one ready that is of the right size and correct heating for the type of snake you are interested in.

Buying from a newspaper advert

This is similar to buying online as the initial information will not be a lot, there may not even be a picture. Contact the seller and get as much information as you can on the health of the snake and whether it comes with a setup [viv] with correct heating or if you must provide one, again if the viv is

your task must you have one ready even if you have to ask the seller to hold on to the snake while you get a viv ready.

Taking in a reptile from a friend

This could be a last minute decision where you are trying to help out a friend or friend of a friend. If they just give you the snake and viv setup still make sure to get all the information you need about feeding and health. It is still a good idea to do more research on the snake you have been given so in the future if something comes up you will know what to do.

