

Argentine Tegu (*Salvator spp.*)

Difficulty: Hard

Argentine tegus are large, 3-5' long lizards with a black and white or red and white pattern, depending on species, although other colors are available in captivity (known as *morphs*). There are two species of Argentine tegu that are commonly kept as pets: the Black and White Tegu (*S. merianae*) and the Red Tegu (*S. rufescens*). There are, however, some tegus available that are a hybrid of the two species.

As their common name suggests, Argentine tegus are native to the southern half of South America, where they can be found in a variety of habitats. They are very much terrestrial lizards—they're generally poor climbers as adults, and spend little (if any) time in the water.

With appropriate socialization, Argentine tegus can make charming, curious, personable pets, which is one of the reasons why they're rapidly becoming one of the most commonly-kept large lizards in the hobby. They live an average of 15-20 years in captivity, although they can live longer.

Due to their size and endless activity, Argentine tegus can make very demanding pets. This is not an animal that you bring home on a whim!

Shopping List

- 8' x 4' x 4' front-opening reptile enclosure
- Ceramic socket lamp mounts, x4
- 175w PAR38 halogen flood bulbs, x4
- Plug-in lamp dimmers, x4
- 4-6 sq ft of flagstone or slate tile, for basking
- Digital thermometer/hygrometer device with probes, x2
- Infrared thermometer ("temperature gun")
- 46" T5 HO desert UVB bulbs (Arcadia or Zoo Med brand), x2
- 46" T5 HO light fixtures with reflector, x2
- 36-48" 6000-7000K LED or fluorescent plant light
- Surge protector with digital timer
- 6"+ of naturalistic substrate
- 1-2 gallon capacity pressure sprayer
- Reptile hideout/cave (sized according to your tegu)
- Environmental enrichment items (additional caves, logs, thick branches, plants, etc.)
- Food and water dishes (sized according to your tegu)
- Calcium powder supplement (low or no D3)
- Multivitamin powder supplement
- Soft-tipped feeding tweezers, 12"

Housing

Argentine tegus are large, active lizards that need plenty of room for their home turf, even if you plan to let your tegu “free roam” supervised on a regular basis. For this reason, an adult tegu should be housed in no smaller than an 8’L x 4’W x 4’H enclosure, preferably larger if possible. This enclosure should be front-opening for easy access and have good ventilation.

Young and growing tegus can usually be housed in an adult-sized enclosures with no problem.

Can multiple tegus be housed together?

Generally speaking, no. Argentine tegus aren’t considered a “social” species, and don’t need “friends” like humans do. They’re perfectly happy to live alone, without having to share their space. Forcing multiple tegus to live together, without appropriate precautions, can lead to serious injury.

Lighting & UVB

Argentine tegus are *diurnal*, which mean that they are more active during the day. This also means that they are stimulated by the presence of bright white light in their environment. Due to the nature of their diet, they can survive without UVB lighting, but they do best when it is provided.

UVB Lighting

UVB lighting can be tricky, because in order to get the right strength of UVB (measured by UV Index, or UVI), distance must be considered. As a rough estimate, to provide appropriate UVB to an Argentine tegu in an 8’ x 4’ x 4’ enclosure, you will need two 46” T5 HO Zoo Med Reptisun or Arcadia D3+ Desert 12% bulbs, placed on the warm side of the enclosure.

(These recommendations are approximations. It is strongly recommended to use a Solarmeter 6.5 to determine the best placement to achieve a UVI of 3.0-4.0 in the basking area.)

Full-Spectrum Lighting

Bright light with a color temperature of 6000-7000K is suggested by experts to be beneficial to diurnal reptiles’ mental health. Full-spectrum lighting is not the same as reptile UVB lighting, so you will need an additional lamp. The 34” Arcadia Jungle Dawn LED Bar or two 22” Bio Dude Glow & Grow fixtures are both excellent options for this purpose.

Heating

Humans are *warm-blooded*, which means that our body temperature is automatically regulated. Argentine tegus, however, are *cold-blooded*, which means that they have to move between areas of different temperatures in order to regulate their body temperature. Tegus warm up by basking under the sun in the wild. In captivity, they do best with a halogen heat lamp.

- **Basking surface temperature:** 125-135°F (52-57°C)
- **Cool zone temperature:** 75-85°F (24-29°C)

Due to the height of the enclosure, you will likely need a very high-wattage heat bulb to accomplish a high enough basking temperature. Generally speaking, 175w PAR38 halogen flood bulbs should be

plenty. However, if you notice that they're getting too hot, dial it down with a plug-in lamp dimmer. If your basking area is too cool, you need higher wattage bulbs.

To achieve an appropriate temperature gradient, the basking area should be on the extreme left or right side of the enclosure. Because an adult tegu is significantly larger than most pet reptiles, it will need a cluster of at least four heat lamps to create a large enough basking area.

To measure the basking surface temperature, use an infrared thermometer (a.k.a. temperature gun). To passively track basking temperature, use a digital probe thermometer, with the probe placed on the basking surface under the heat source. The Etekcity 774 is a good infrared thermometer, and most reptile-brand digital probe thermometers function well.

Humidity

Tegus do best in a high-humidity environment, with an **average humidity of 70-80%** as measured by a digital probe hygrometer with the probe placed on the ground on the cool side of the enclosure.

Humidity levels that are consistently too low can cause health problems for your tegu. However, it is normal for humidity levels to rise at night and fall during the day.

To achieve high enough humidity for your tegu, try these strategies:

- Mix water into the substrate until it is uniformly moist (not muddy). Repeat as needed.
- Mist the enclosure daily with a large pressure sprayer.
- Provide a cool humid hide box lined with damp sphagnum moss. Humidity levels in this hide should stay between 90-100%, with the moss replaced regularly to prevent mold.

Substrate

Tegus are healthiest and happiest when they are housed on a substrate (a.k.a. "bedding") that imitates the conditions of their natural habitat. In their native habitat in South America, that means dirt. So it's ideal to provide clean, chemical-free soil as the substrate in your tegu's enclosure, packed 6" deep or more.

Considering the sheer quantity of substrate that you will need for your tegu, it's most economical (and effective) to use gardening soil and play sand in your tegu's enclosure. I'm prefer a 40/40/20 mix of organic topsoil, Zoo Med ReptiSoil, and play sand, but in a pinch you can use 80% topsoil and 20% sand. For best results, add a generous layer of leaf litter.

Sick or wounded reptiles should not be kept on loose substrate. Instead, use paper towels until they have recovered.

Feces and urates should be removed daily, and contaminated substrate should be scooped out and replaced. Substrate should be completely replaced once every 4-6 months, depending on your needs.

Décor

Decorations play an important role in your tegu's enclosure as environmental enrichment. Enrichment items encourage exercise, stimulate your pet's natural instincts, and help promote overall wellbeing.

And, of course, they make the enclosure look nicer! Hollow logs, tree stumps, large, sturdy branches; and large live or artificial plants work well. Arrange these items in a way that encourages your tegu to climb and explore, and provides additional places to hide as needed.

Food

Argentine tegus are *omnivores*, which means that they need both animal- and plant-based foods to get the nutrition that their bodies need. How often and how much they need to eat depends on age:

- **Hatchlings (0-6 months)** — 5x/week (70-80% protein, 20-30% vegetables and fruit)
- **Juveniles (7-12 months)** — 4x/week (70-80% protein, 20-30% vegetables and fruit)
- **Subadults (1-2 years)** — 3x/week (70-80% protein, 20-30% vegetables and fruit)
- **Adults (>2 years)** — 2x/week (60% protein, 30% vegetables, 10% fruit)

Feeder insects: crickets, dubia roaches, red runner roaches, black soldier fly larvae, mealworms, darkling beetles, hornworms, silkworms, snails, grasshoppers, chicks, quail chicks, egg (with shell), mice, rats, gerbils, small rabbits, shrimp, salmon, high-quality canned dog food

Safe vegetables: collard greens, cactus pads, spring mix, arugula, kale, pea shoots, alfalfa, bok choy, carrot greens and roots, spinach, dandelion greens/flowers, hibiscus leaves/flowers

Fruit is high in sugar and should only be offered as an occasional, vitamin-rich treat. Options include berries, figs, apples, prickly pear, papaya, and mango.

The key to providing a healthy, balanced diet for your pet tegu is VARIETY. Provide as varied of a diet as you possibly can, and you will be rewarded with a healthier pet that always looks forward to mealtime.

Supplements

To ensure that your tegu is getting all of the vitamins and minerals that they need, you will need a calcium powder and a multivitamin powder — or a good all-in-one.

There are many options, but you can't go wrong with Arcadia Earthpro A or Repashy Calcium Plus LoD, which are both solid all-in-one reptile supplements. For best results, use as directed by the label.

Water

Your tegu should have free access to a fresh, clean water daily, in a container large enough to allow for soaking. Many have found that shallow storage bins work well for this purpose.

For more information about Argentine tegu care, read the full-length [Tegu Care Guide](#) at ReptiFiles.com.