



MOVE OVER, FIDO

By **Vicki Vass.** Special to the Tribune

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Henry Romero has figured out a unique way to teach responsibility and biology to his two children. Kelvin, 12, and Deanne, 14, help him care for the iguana, a leopard gecko and chameleons that reside in the reptile zoo in the family's Round Lake Beach home.

"It's helped them learn the responsibility of caring for something else," he said. "They make sure the reptiles get their requirements, including heat and nutrition needs. They've learned a lot about biology."

The family's collection began with one iguana and grew from there, Romero said. "I've always been curious about lizards. I'm intrigued by their movement, sleek bodies and how they change colors."

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g-based American Veterinary Association, the
Although dogs and cats still hold a commanding

lead in pet circles, the popularity of turtles, snakes, lizards and other reptiles increased between 1991 and 1996. Approximately 1.5 percent of households own 3.5 million reptiles.

Some of that can be attributed to the ease of maintenance, said Paul Keeler, vice president of Gurnee Mills' Serpent Safari. Certain snakes can be forgotten about for a week, he said, and that's a plus for people with increasingly busy schedules.

"They're not making demands for exercise, and you have companionship when you want it," Keeler said. "And most reptiles never have to be taken to the veterinarian, so your lifetime expense decreases as compared to your dog or cat."

Besides selling reptile pets, Serpent Safari has a zoo collection of snakes, iguanas and the largest albino python in the world, a 400-pounder listed in the Guinness Book of World Records.

"(Reptiles) have no odor, no smell. There are no hair follicles, so you don't have dander; for someone with allergies or asthma, they're the perfect pet," Keeler said.

Most of these exotics simply require a tank with some type of litter and a heating device to keep the cold-blooded creatures warm. A snake needs an enclosure typically as long as it is, and Keeler recommends accessorizing with foliage to offer a natural environment. Romero said a tank and setup can cost a several hundred dollars, on top of the cost of the pet and its regular food. Other care includes changing the litter once a week and feeding. A snake will eat 200 to 500 rodents -- their primary food, though some also eat insects -- in its lifetime and can live 10 to 20 years.

Serpent Safari staffers offer counseling on bringing an exotic pet into the home; although an iguana is perfect for the beginning reptile enthusiast, a Burmese python is not for everyone, Keeler says. In accordance with state law, Serpent Safari does not sell constrictors longer than 6 feet. But the Burmese python can grow to 100 to 150 pounds and can be the diameter of an adult's leg. In the wrong hands, a Burmese python could kill a person, but such cases are extremely rare, Keeler said.

"It's akin to having a 150-pound rottweiler in the house," Keeler said.

A teenager may be able to handle a snake that size, Keeler said, but a smaller child should stick with an iguana or turtle.

"We want to make sure a 6-year-old is not in charge of feeding a large, powerful constrictor. We also like to make sure they've had pets before and will provide a responsible proper-size enclosure," he added.

An iguana eats fruits and vegetables and needs a perch in its tank to hang out on.

imal is not prone to making a run for it.

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Cost for a pet can start at \$4.99 for a little anode chameleon. The average cost of a lizard is \$30. Crickets favored by some reptiles cost \$1 a dozen, which will last a couple of months.

Keeler said his love of exotic pets is an outgrowth of a childhood fascination with dinosaurs.

"Reptiles were as close as I could get to dinosaurs," Keeler said. "I also liked the fact they were unusual. I think that's what is spurring the whole growth of exotic animals as pets."

Romero said that's what led him to his first iguana.

"I wanted something you wouldn't see all the time. It's also an opportunity to look at a different habitat," he said.

Lake Villa resident Amanda Conant has the traditional dog, but also a 4-foot iguana, which she walks on a leash in the summer.

"She likes to be left alone," Conant said of the iguana. "You don't have to take the care with her that you do the dog. She's very low-maintenance."

However, don't expect that snake or iguana to fetch your slippers or the newspaper.

"They're not terribly intelligent," Keeler said. "But you're keeping them in the ideal world where they're not competing for food and are handled by a loving, responsible person."

Nor will the reptile pet climb into bed with you and curl up around your feet. His iguana isn't particularly affectionate, Romero said, although the chameleon and gecko will both climb around his and his children's shoulders.

Having an exotic pet can offer a better explanation of the ecosystem. Some owners set up a tank with fish in the wet area and amphibians such as turtles and lizards on the dry area. "It offers a beautiful look at our environment," Keeler said.

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