



Portsmouth Reptile & Amphibian Society
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P.R.A.S Care sheet No 2



Common Name: Royal Python

Scientific Name: *Python regius*

Care difficulty:

Not a beginners snake though a popular second snake. They don't grow to a large size and are generally placid. However, they can be tricky to feed at times and can undergo long periods of fasting.

Distribution:

Most Royal Pythons in captivity are originally sourced from the south-western areas of Africa, though their natural range extends, sub-Saharan, across to the Nile.

Description:

Royal Pythons are fairly chunky, short-tailed snakes. Colouration is a mixture of brown, black and white with quite complex patterning. A noticeable feature is their heat-detecting pits (or holes) around their upper lip. Most individuals also show hind leg remnants (spurs) sited on either side of their vent. There are now several pattern and colour morphs available for this species.

Size:

As a hatchling they are around 20-25cm (6-8") and weigh between 50-120gms. Adult females are generally longer and heavier than males, perhaps reaching 1.8m (5.5') and 3.5-4kg (6-8lbs) at the larger end of the scale.

Housing:

Hatchlings can be reared in geo-flats, crystal tubs or similar. An adult will have sufficient space in a vivarium 100x50x50cm (40x20x20"). Although a larger space with climbing branches will definitely be appreciated by your python. Royals can be housed together, however at some times of the year males may fight each other. Reliable feeding may be achieved more easily if they are kept in individual vivariums.

The choice of substrate for the vivarium is dependent on your own preference. Bark

chippings, wood shavings (never cedar, as this is toxic to snakes) and newspaper are all easy to maintain. For hygiene reasons remove waste matter as soon as practical, this will also ensure that there are no unpleasant odours from your vivarium. The entire substrate should be replaced every few months or so, and the vivarium cleaned with a disinfectant suitable for use with reptiles.

The vivarium should be heated with a hot spot at one end of around 30°C (90°F.) The heat source should be positioned at the extreme end of the cage, allowing for a thermal gradient between the two ends. Hide boxes on both the warm and cool ends should be available to allow your python to hide away and a water bowl large enough for the snake to soak in is probably best placed somewhere in between the hide boxes. Artificial and UV light are not required although daytime lights can be effective, as long as the enclosure does not overheat. At night the temperature should be kept as per the day, unless a breeding season is being emulated in which case a slight night time temperature drop is acceptable but should not go under 25°C (75°F.) Putting all heat sources on a reliable thermostat is much advised to keep the vivarium at the correct temperatures, and prevent overheating.

All bulbs and heaters must be fitted with a mesh guard as royals can and do burn themselves if given direct access to a heat source.

Humidity should be kept between 40 and 60%, so a hydrometer would be useful to check this, and should be around 60% when it is shedding. This keeps the snake's skin in good condition and helps achieve a clean shed. Raising humidity can be easily achieved by light misting with a hand spray. Make sure that the humidity is not too high however, as this can lead to respiratory infections. Provide clean water at all times in a heavy water bowl that cannot be tipped over by the snake, and is large enough for the snake to soak in.

Diet and Feeding:

In the wild Royals take a variety of prey including small mammals and birds. In captivity they will accept a diet of mice and rats, often-reluctant feeders may show a preference for gerbils. It is recommended that you get an idea of the feeding history when you purchase the animal and that you have access to suitable food items. Ideally, they should be feeding on thawed prey items, which are easiest to obtain.

Hatchlings should be offered food every 6-8 days, adults every 10-14 days. Being heavy bodied strong snakes they will eat relatively large food items, hatchlings will quickly progress from fuzzy mice up through to adult mice in their first year. Adult females will ultimately be eating small adult rats, weaned rats being suitable for adult males.

A set of scales weighing in at least 10g intervals is a useful thing to have access to as royals can refuse food for quite long periods of time (months!) and it is helpful to be able to check if it is losing weight.

Breeding:

Unlike temperate region snakes, royals must not be hibernated. Most breeding successes seem to use a nighttime temperature drop to around 25°C (75°F) with full temperature being retained in the daytime period. This is undertaken for 2-3 months usually during

our winter. Gradually turn the night time temperature down over a period of a couple of weeks. Once they are "cooled" in this way most breeders then introduce two males together to induce male combat. After a day in together place each male in with a female and see if mating takes place. Mating can last for up to 36 hours and is obvious to observe, as the snakes will coil their tails together. Only healthy snakes should be cooled and used for breeding. In the spring raise the night-time temperature back up to normal and feeding can commence.

If mating has been successful, the female will eat well and obviously gain bulk. She will also get herself into strange positions in order to get heat to the developing eggs; "sunbathing" on her back is fairly common. At some point around this time a nest box should be placed in the vivarium, a plastic container such as a large ice-cream tub lined with damp sphagnum moss will suffice. Once the eggs have been laid the female will tightly coil around them, though it is advisable to remove the eggs into a plastic box with 100% humidity and a substrate of moist vermiculite or perlite and kept at a constant temperature of 30°C. (90°F.). The average number of eggs laid is around 5-6; they are about 100mm long, 60mm in diameter. Unlike bird's eggs they must not be turned. The eggs are normally ivory white and for most of the incubation period will be firm to the touch, as hatching nears (after 55-65 days) they may become slightly "baggy". When the juveniles arrive they should be placed into individual warm humid containers with a heat gradient as per the adults. They will slough after about 10-14 days and should then be offered suitable food. Sexual maturity can be reached at 3-5 years.

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