



## Jackson's Chameleons

*Chamaeleo jacksonii*

**Amanda Zellar, DVM**

Chameleons are one of the most difficult species of reptiles to keep successfully in captivity. Jackson's chameleons are native to Kenya and Tanzania. There are invasive populations in Hawaii. Males reach a length of 12", while females top out at 8-9". Jackson's tend to live 3-8 years, with females at the lower end. Males are easily distinguished by the triple-horn arising from the forehead. Jackson's do not lay eggs; they are live-bearers. From 5-50 young can be born, and are 1 and 1/2" long.

**Health care:** Chameleons can be very good at hiding illness. We recommend biannual exams, with fecal parasite screening and x-rays, to make sure your pet is healthy! Common problems are intestinal parasites, anorexia, and intestinal obstruction. Remember with any disease processes, the sooner we see the animal, the more successful we are at treating it!

**Husbandry concerns:** Do not house with species from other countries, to prevent exposure to new diseases. Excessive handling while they are new should be avoided. They are very territorial, so avoid housing 2 together. Terrariums that are taller than they are wide are preferred as chameleons are arboreal (tree dwelling). Chameleons require both high humidity and good airflow. Chameleons without sufficient airflow are prone to respiratory infections, while those kept in too low humidity often become chronically dehydrated causing problems shedding and predisposing to kidney disease. Mesh sided cages tend to work best. Humidity should be maintained at 50-75% and monitored using a hygrometer. If this level of humidity proves difficult to reach, covering 2-3 sides of the enclosure with plastic or foil, and misting the cage or using a humidifier may be helpful. The minimum tank size for an adult chameleon is 2' x 1' x 3' high, with 1/8th" plastic mesh sides, and newspaper or indoor-outdoor carpet on the bottom to avoid swallowing non-food items and difficulty finding food. Immature chameleons may need a smaller cage, 16" x 16" x 32", while learning to catch prey, until they are about 8 months old. Provide lots of items to climb on! Chameleons would rather sit in tangles of leaves high up than in caves on the ground. Non-toxic live plants, like bromeliads can be great and help keep up humidity. A ceramic heat lamp should provide a focal basking spot of 85°F, while the rest of the cage should have a gradient down to 75-80°F. At night, the cage can cool down to 60-65°F. Do not allow contact with the lamp. Do not use hot rocks or pads as they can easily cause thermal burns! At night, make sure lights are off. Use a digital thermometer for temperature measurement and measure at the level where the skink

**More on the back!**

lives. A UV light is necessary, and should provide 12 hours of light with at least 5% UVB, not being screened by plastic/glass/mesh, and within 14 inches of the chameleon. If the light is going to pass through the mesh top of a cage, it should be at least 9% UVB, as 40% of UVB is lost passing through the mesh. In the wild, chameleons drink water droplets off of leaves. They often do not figure out how to use a water dish. Use either a water drip system or ice cubes on a mesh cage top and allow them to melt and drip on leaves beneath with a water dish below them. This may also help chameleons learn to use a water dish as the water splashing attracts their attention. Be sure that the water dish is shallow and chameleons can climb out of it if they fall in to prevent drowning!

**Diet:** Feed juvenile chameleons 1-2 times per day and adults every other day. Jackson's chameleons are insectivores. We recommend a varied diet of crickets, silkworms, caterpillars, millipedes, earthworms, locusts, flies, moths, walking stick insects, grasshoppers, spiders, snails, or dubia roaches. AVOID FIREFLIES AS THEY ARE POISONOUS! Make sure wild-caught food is pesticide free. Items need to be rotated and varied, as occurs in the wild. Adults can eat the equivalent of 30-50 adult crickets/week. Hatchlings do best with flightless fruit flies or baby crickets. Captive-raised insects need to be fed a gut-loading diet such as T-rex for several days, or a diet recommended by your veterinarian. These insects should be misted in a zip-loc bag, then shake-and-baked with a calcium-only powder coating (Avoid supplements containing vitamin D3, vitamin A and phosphorus) before feeding to the chameleon. We recommend crushing Cherry or Fruit-flavored Tums into a powder and sprinkling a small pinch onto the food of each animal. The other recommended supplement is called Blue-Green Algae (spirulina), of which a pinch from a capsule should be added as above, with a capsule lasting 2 weeks/chameleon (So a small pinch!). Occasionally hiding food provides enrichment and challenge for your pet also.

