



## Popular Varieties

One of the largest of all the lizard families is the Scincidae, or skink family. The most prominent and popular of the pet skinks is the *Tiliqua*, or blue-tongued skink. There are several different species and subspecies of blue-tongued skink, all of which sport the trademark berry-blue tongue.

There are ten types, or subspecies, of blue-tongued skink. They are the Western, Centralian, Eastern, Northern, Blotched, Pygmy, Indonesian, Kei Island, Tanimbar Island, and Merauke blue-tongued skinks.

## Blue-Tongued Skink Size

Blue-tongued skinks are rather heavy-bodied, medium-sized lizards with short, stubby tails and legs, and triangular heads. They are slow moving lizards, due to their short and stubby legs, and they don't like to climb very much.

The size of your pet blue-tongued skink will largely depend on the species you purchase, but generally speaking, they will grow to attain a length of up to 20 inches and sometimes more. The average size of each blue-tongued skink species is broken out below:

- Western blue-tongued skinks grow to be about 19.5 inches (50 cm) in length. They are one of the more rare species of skink and are usually not kept as pets.
- Pygmy blue-tongued skinks are the smallest and rarest of the skink species, measuring a mere 4 inches (10 cm) in length at the max.
- Blotched blue-tongued skinks can grow to a length of 23.5 inches (60 cm).
- Tanimbar Island skinks are smaller, ranging in size from 15 to 17 inches (38 to 43 cm) in length.

- Northern blue-tongued skinks are the largest and heaviest species, growing to an average size of 24 inches (61 cm) in length.
- Eastern blue-tongued skinks are also called common blue-tongued skinks and grow to an average length of 19 inches (48 cm).
- Centralian blue-tongued skinks grow between 15.5 and 17.5 inches (40 to 45 cm) in length.
- Merauke blue-tongued skinks frequently reach lengths of 25 to 30 inches (63.5 – 76 cm).
- Kei Island and Indonesian blue-tongued skinks grow to around 19.75 inches in length (50 cm).

## **Blue-Tongued Skink Lifespan**

As you can see, there are many different types of blue-tongued skink out there, and each species and subspecies has a different lifespan and different characteristics. That said, the entire skink family is relatively long-lived. If you're considering the purchase of a pet blue-tongued skink, be prepared to make a commitment of at least twenty years.

The normal life expectancy of a captive skink is anywhere between fifteen and twenty years, but some have been reported to live in excess of thirty-two years.

## **Blue-Tongued Skink Appearance**

Blue-tongued skinks, as the name suggests, are best known for their bright blue, berry-hued tongues.

Their scales have a high-gloss appearance and come in a wide variety of patterns, colors and markings. Their base color can range from a creamy, golden yellow to reds, oranges, silvery-gray, and in some cases they are completely black or brown.

Depending on the species of skink, some will take on different patterning and banding than others.

## **Blue-Tongued Skink Care Level**

Blue-tongued skinks are as a whole a friendly, intelligent bunch, as far as lizards go. They make great reptile pets, but they are sizeable lizard to hold. They settle down quickly, are easily acclimated to captivity, and grow into approachable, submissive pets. However, certain species are calmer than others, and not every type of blue-tongued skink can be considered safe for children.

While the cost of maintenance and care is relatively low, especially when compared to a dog or cat pet, blue-tongued skinks can live for quite some time. For these reasons they can be considered good for beginners to advanced herpetoculturists, but a great deal of thought and consideration should be taken before committing to a blue-tongued skink of your own.

## **Blue-Tongued Skink Diet**

## **Feeding Your Blue-Tongued Skink**

Blue-tongued skinks are omnivores, eating both plants and meat, but their diet should consist of about 70% fresh fruits, vegetables, and other plant matter—great news if you don't like the idea of bringing live insects into your home to feed your skink!

Frozen vegetables can be used, but shouldn't be used exclusively because they don't have enough thiamine to support a healthy skink. Make sure your blue-tongued skink has a varied diet, consisting of about 50% vegetables and greens, 20% fruits and flowers, and 30% animal protein in the form of meat, fish, invertebrates, or rodents.

Vegetables to feed your skink can include kale, prickly-pear pad, fresh okra and corn, grated carrot, green beans, beets, turnips, collards, bok choy, and endives.

Calcium-rich fruits and flowers like raspberry, strawberries, roses, and blueberry can make up the remainder of the vegetarian portion of your skink's diet.

A word of caution: do not feed your skink avocado (it's toxic), lettuce, spinach, acidic citrus fruits (they cause diarrhea), and rhubarb (another poison).

As for the meat in your blue-tongue's diet, whether or not you cook the meat is a matter of preference; see what your skink prefers. If you try raw meat, beef heart and liver are both excellent options—you can ask for them in the meat department of most grocery stores. You can also feed your blue-tongued skink baby pinkie mice, baby rats, and insects like giant mealworms or crickets. You can also occasionally supplement them with low-fat, high-quality canned dog or cat food.

The amount of food to feed your skink depends on its size and age, but generally speaking you'll want to offer babies and young skinks food as often and as much as they want over a six-day period, and then letting them fast on the seventh day. Adult skinks can be offered fresh food every other day.

Place the food in a shallow dish and always remove any uneaten portions.

Another important note: Never leave live prey in the cage with your skink overnight. An understandably frightened prey animal can cause injury to your dragon, sometimes severe enough for emergency care.

## **Blue-Tongued Skink Health**

Blue-tongued skinks as a whole are a relatively hardy, easy-to-care for lizard. Since they live in a completely different environment than humans and other mammals, keeping them as healthy pets requires close observation, proper hygiene, and devotion.

It's in your and your new pet's best interest to find a qualified reptile veterinarian before you even bring your skink home. Even reptiles may require veterinarian attention at some point,

especially ones with lifespans as long as the skink. You'll have to call around and look for a vet that specializes in "exotics," and that has experience with reptiles—ideally, with blue-tongued skinks.

### **Common Health Issues in Blue-Tongued Skinks**

If your blue-tongued skink is ill or stressed it may stop eating and spend most of its time in hiding. Pet reptiles in general can succumb to a number of diseases and illnesses. The following is a short summary of commonly seen blue-tongued skink diseases and disorders.

#### **Raw Nose**

This condition is found in wild-caught skinks and nervous captive pet skinks. It's characterized by an irritated or bleeding nose, which is caused by the skink rubbing its snout on its habitat enclosure.

#### **Claw (Nail) Problems**

These are quite common because in the wild, blue-tongued skinks' nails are naturally filed down as they walk, but in captivity their claws need to be cut periodically. Check your blue-tongue's feet every six to eight weeks and if you notice a lot of growth, clip them with a pair of nail clippers.

Be very cautious when clipping, as each nail has a blood vessel and will bleed if cut into, so don't go too short.

#### **Shedding (Sloughing) Complications**

Also called Dysecdysis, this happens if the skink's environment isn't humid enough to support regular skin shedding. Keeping the animal's substrate damp by spraying it once or twice daily will help prevent this from happening.

A note on skink sloughing: they shed their skin in patches, not all at once like snakes.

#### **Internal and External Parasites**

Regularly check your skink for ticks and remove them if found. Mites are another type of external parasite, but they must be eradicated in stages. A mite infestation looks like a white, red, or black wriggling dust on the body of your skink.

As for internal parasites like tapeworms, lungworms, and roundworms, monitor your skink for things like lethargy and bloody stool. If you notice emaciation or bloody stool seek veterinary help right away.

#### **Mouth Rot**

Also called Stomatitis, this is a common health issue in lizards. It's characterized by a cheesy secretion that comes from the mouth, teeth, and lips. It can happen if the skink injures itself while eating, becomes stressed, or as a result of poor husbandry.

### **Dehydration**

Characterized by tight, wrinkly skin, usually around the animal's neck.

### **Thermal (Skin) Burns**

These are serious and often caused by heat sources that are placed too close to the skink or are unprotected. Blisters and burns should be treated immediately with cold compresses for thirty minutes to avoid complications such as infection.

### **Blister Disease/Scale Rot**

This is often caused by habitats that are too dirty or wet. Also called scale rot, Blister disease is characterized by large blisters that, if untreated, fill with fluid and rupture, leaving the wound open to opportunistic infection.

### **Blue-Tongued Skink Behavior**

As stated earlier, blue-tongued skinks as a whole are smart, submissive, and interesting animals that make great pets for all levels and ages of herpetoculturist. However, there are some species of blue-tongue that are extremely aggressive and shouldn't be kept as pets. One of the worst offenders is the Tanimbar Island blue-tongued skink, which is extremely aggressive and not recommended for families with children.

As with any pet that is becoming acclimated to new home, new blue-tongued skinks may exhibit behaviors like hissing, hiding, or puffing themselves up in defense. When frightened, a skink will curl its body into a C-shape, pointing its tail and bright blue tongue out as it puffs its body up in an attempt to scare away predators. This defensive behavior is typical in newly acclimated blue-tongued skinks and will subside with time and regular handling as they get used to their new homes.

### **Supplies for the Blue-Tongued Skink's Environment**

#### **Aquarium Tank or Vivarium Setup**

Your pet skink's home, let's call it a vivarium, can be made from plastic, glass, wood, or whatever you think will work the best. However, it should be easy to clean, easy to access, have adequate ventilation, be free of sharp edges, and above all, it needs to be escape-proof.

The size of your vivarium needs to be big. For just one skink the minimum floor area of 39 by 20 inches (100 by 50 cm) will suffice, but an area of 47 by 24 inches (120 by 60 cm) would be better. Remember, these lizards have short legs and cannot leap or climb very high.

Skinks are territorial, and you should never keep more than one male in the same cage. For these reasons, if you're planning on owning multiples or breeding your blue-tongues, always have an extra vivarium on hand.

Substrate for your skink's home should be somewhat absorbent and easy to clean and replace. You could leave the floor bare, but it may cause claw problems, as noted above in the section on Health. Wood shavings are an excellent option for absorbing odor and liquid, plus you can spot clean wood shavings easily. Newspaper also makes a good substrate, as do certain reptile carpets and certain types of gravel and perlite-free potting soil.

### **Branches and Shelters**

Having a safe spot to hide away is essential for a blue-tongued skink. You will need to provide two places to hide in your skink's vivarium. The hides need to be large enough to completely conceal the animal's entire body; they can be as simple as a cardboard shoebox, or they can be decorative "caves." Just remember that you'll need to keep whatever furnishing you include nice and clean.

We mentioned earlier that blue-tongued skinks have stubby, little legs and don't really climb because of them. While they don't like to climb, skinks are still inquisitive little creatures and they do like to clamber over things and explore their surroundings. So while it isn't necessary to provide logs or branches for climbing, they do make nice additions for fun and for basking in their warm spots.

### **Heat and Light**

The most important features of your skink's new home are lighting and heating. Skinks require a gradient of heat so they can regulate their own body temperatures. You'll need to provide a daytime air temperature between 86 and 95 degrees Fahrenheit (30-35 C), and a nighttime temperature that doesn't fall below 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit (21-24 C). Using multiple thermometers with digital readouts throughout the vivarium will help you maintain the right temperatures. The substrate itself should be around 95 degrees Fahrenheit (35 C) at the hot end and 86 degrees Fahrenheit (30 C) at the cooler end.

Research has shown that blue-tongued skinks really benefit from full-spectrum lighting with UV. The tricky part is selecting the right type of UV for your skink. Make sure to purchase lights that emit both the beneficial UVA and UVB—don't be afraid to ask your pet supply dealer which lights are the best.

Make sure you don't have plastic, glass, or plexi-glass under the bulbs, as those materials can become hot enough to seriously burn your skink. Keep the light/heat source outside of the enclosure and about 18 inches away from any outer surface.

## **Humidity (Air Moisture)**

Blue-tongued skinks require levels of heat and humidity, so keep that in mind when deciding on the material for your vivarium.

Maintain a humidity level between 20% and 45% by keeping a water bowl in the vivarium (you should be providing a water bowl anyway) and misting your skink from time to time. Skinks tend to have the annoying habit of fouling their water bowl as soon as it's changed, so keep an eye on your skink's water bowl. A good rule of thumb is to check it every few hours to refill and/or replace the water bowl.

## **Water for Your Blue-Tongued Skink**

You will need to provide a nice, big bowl of water for your skink to drink from and bathe in. As noted above, skinks tend to foul their water quickly; check the water bowl every few hours to refill or replace the bowl.

## **Habitat and History**

All blue-tongues are native to Australasia; they can be found throughout mainland Australia and parts of Asia, as well as Papua New Guinea and a few other Indonesian islands.

Although blue-tongued skinks can be found in numerous varieties, sizes, and colors, this lizard species was at one time completely ignored by reptile and lizard enthusiasts. It has become extremely popular in recent years due to its distinctive berry-blue tongue, variability, and submissive behavior.

There are several species of blue-tongued skink on the endangered lists, but for the most part, blue-tongued skinks are widely available and easy to find in the pet trade.

Now that you've set up and furnished your blue-tongued skink's vivarium, secured a reliable veterinarian (just in case), and brought a healthy new specimen home, you're ready to go! With the proper care and a little love, you're in for years of fun with your pet blue-tongued skink.

*This article was verified and edited for accuracy by Dr. Adam Denish, VMD.*

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