

The tokay gecko has both



In the rainforests of Asia and Southeast Asia, you can hear the sounds of tokay geckos -- “to-kay, to-kay” -- as they call out to each other during breeding season, which lasts four to five months a year.

To United States soldiers during the Vietnam War, they were annoying “fuck-you” lizards, a moniker given for their distinctive barks, as well as for the tokays’ notorious aggressive behavior.

One of the largest species of geckos, tokay geckos are full-bodied and average 14 inches in length. Usually bluish-gray with red spots, these handsome devils can protect themselves from predators by lightening or darkening their skin color to blend in with their surroundings. They live an average of 10 years, but can live as long as 20 years in captivity.

According to the Smithsonian National Zoological Park, these geckos have four feet with five padded toes layered with thousands of fine hairs that give them their ability to cling to any surface. Scents are picked up by their tongues; like iguanas, they can release their tails as a defense mechanism and grow replacements that are shorter than the originals. If you can get close enough to look into a tokay’s ear, you will see clear through its head.

Beauty and the Bite

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Getting that close to a tokay, though, is no pleasant experience. These nocturnal reptiles are fiercely territorial loners except in mating season. If you get in their space -- watch out. Their powerful jaws and sharp teeth, designed to crush the hard shells of rainforest species of cockroaches, will clamp on and not let go.

This reputation for biting makes the tokay gecko less likely a pick by the novice lizard pet owner, but not so for avid "gecko whisperers" out there who are up for the challenge. They say it takes patience and commitment to daily handling to tame these often stressed out and unlovable creatures, all the while exposing their hands to the tokays' dangerous jaws.

In Asia, the tokay is sought after for its healing powers and is an ingredient in Chinese medicine, used to treat kidney and lung ailments. Some South Asian cultures consider tokay geckos good luck and let them loose inside their homes to control insects. The BT's "Your Garden" columnist, Jeff Shimonski, recalls, "I traveled to Latin America a couple of times in the 1970s with a herpetologist friend who had suggested to me letting a tokay loose in my house. I said that was pretty cool, not realizing that he would deliver a full-grown tokay to my house for my birthday.

"I let 'Fritz' loose inside the house and he promptly took up residence behind the fridge," says Shimonski. "He would come out at night and explore the house. I would find his footprints on my dresser mirror in the morning."

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission notes small populations of tokay geckos have been reported in the wild, having been released by pet owners. In an e-mail exchange with Carli Segelson of FWC's Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, she writes, "The tokay is considered an unprotected non-native species." The geckos' affinity for urban areas makes them less likely to impact natural habitats. FWC has no immediate plans to remove the species from Florida, but land managers can remove them in the future if necessary.

Segelson points out that only one tokay was surrendered at a FWC-sponsored Exotic Pet Amnesty Day event in 2015, and one so far this year.

If you want to make a tokay a part of your family, you will need a 20-gallon tank crammed with

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natural arboreal habitat for it to climb on and hide in, such as plants, bark, sticks, rocks, hollow logs, and rock caves. Hiding behavior is a stress reliever for this pet.

Humidity levels are important in a tropical vivarium. Water should be sprayed on tank walls and plant leaves for them to drink. Three to four inches of cypress mulch floor substrate can hold humidity, while good tank ventilation prevents fungus growth.

Insects are their main diet: cockroaches, mealworms, crickets, and grasshoppers. Segelson notes that in the Florida wild, “tokays can prey upon native species including arboreal lizards, frogs, snakes, rodents, and possibly nestling birds.”

Handling gloves are a must-have, even if you’re not into taming your tokay. Be prepared for receiving wicked bites when the tank needs to be cleaned, as transferring the tokay to a temporary receptacle involves catching it.

If you want a happy tokay gecko, give this exotic plenty of space, places to hide, and keep it hydrated. Shimonski adds, “They are aggressive if you mess with them. Don’t mess with them.” Future tokay owners be warned: “They can certainly chase off the occasional lizard-phobic girlfriend at that special romantic moment.”

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