

CHAMAELEONS INFO SHEET

Chamaeleons are truly among the world's weirdest and most wonderful creatures. Many species can change colour, have turret eyes that move independently, can shoot out their tongues (in some species, for a distance as great as the animal's body length), and they have modified feet with opposable toes, a prehensile tail and (in some species) elaborate crests, veils and horns!

These bizarre but beautiful reptiles are ambush predators that rely on camouflage to hide themselves. The biggest species of chamaeleons can exceed 30 cm in length and catch all manner of arthropods, including large locusts, dragonflies and moths. The very smallest chamaeleons measure just 3 cm in length when mature, and catch prey the size of ants. Many chameleons spend their lives in the branches of trees and bushes, while a few small species live exclusively on the ground, hunting amongst the leaf litter.

Approximately 200 species of chamaeleons have been described to date. Most chamaeleon species occur in Madagascar (approx 120 species), however a few occur widely across Africa, parts of the Middle East, southern Europe and parts of Asia.

Chamaeleons use their exceptional ability to change colour to blend in with surroundings whilst hunting. Many species also respond with dramatic, colourful displays when rival males meet one another, or when they need to show aggression, anger, fear or are confronted by a potential predator. If threatened, many chamaeleons can inflate their bodies, puffing themselves up to look as large as possible, and they emit a loud hiss or screech to startle their opponent.

Image 1: The panther chamaeleon, *Furcifer pardalis* can be very colourful.

Image 2: A young panther chamaeleon shooting out its tongue.



How to keep chameleons

The following is a brief summary and does not include all of the information required to look after these exquisite creatures. If you are interested in keeping chameleons, please refer to the chameleons chapter in the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book.

Chameleons make fascinating pets, but they are not the easiest reptiles to care for. They have very specific requirements, and are sensitive, easily stressed and fragile. If you succeed in keeping a bearded dragon or a harmless snake, you could try rearing a veiled, Jackson's or panther chameleon (these three are the easiest to keep and most widely available species).

Select a reptile vivarium or an aquarium-style glass tank with a lid that is at least 90 cm long, 60 cm wide and 80 cm tall. Chameleons become stressed and may fight if kept in the same enclosure, so always house each animal separately. Ensure that the enclosure has a lid, but that it also has good ventilation.

Add sheets of newspaper, paper towels, shredded coconut husks or reptile turf (available at your local pet store) as a floor covering in the enclosure. Then add pieces of sterilised driftwood, cork bark, sticks and branches to give your chameleon lots of furniture to climb on.

Most chameleons require temperatures of 25–31 °C during the day and less at night. Heating can easily be achieved by using a reptile-grade heat lamp. Install a heat lamp at one end of the enclosure and make sure that there is an unheated section to allow your chameleon to cool off when it needs to.

A reptile-grade lamp (emitting UVB and UVA light) is also essential. Chameleons require exposure to ultraviolet light in order to produce vitamin D, with 12 to 14 hours of exposure required daily.

Spray your chameleon with chlorine-free water each day, and ensure large droplets of water coat plants or furniture within the enclosure or the enclosure's sides so that your pet can drink. Feed your chameleon live food (crickets, small locusts or mealworms from pet shops work best). If cared for correctly, your pet chameleons may live for up to a decade in captivity!

Image 3: Chameleons are cunning ambush predators;

Image 4: The Jackson's chameleon, *Trioceros jacksonii*;

Image 5: The panther chameleon, *Furcifer pardalis*;

Image 6: The veiled chameleon, *Chamaeleo calyptratus*.



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**Buy the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book
to discover the biology, ecology, diversity
and how to keep chameleons.**

**To order your copy visit:
www.weirdandwonderfulpets.com**

