

African Tarantulas

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I remember only too well the very first time I saw a large, magnificent female specimen of *Heteroscodra maculata*. Up to that point in time my experience with tarantulas consisted of several years of maintaining several females of *Brachypelma smithi* and *Grammostola rosea*. Yet, even though I was properly warned of the aggressiveness of this incredible tarantula, I had to acquire one of these African arboreal beauties! I had never worked with such fast moving and highly defensive tarantulas, but no warning would dissuade me from my decision and now, after many years and over 50 *H. maculata* later, I still consider them to be the most beautiful tarantula available in the hobby.

Despite the many warnings and other cautionary advice by well-meaning, experienced and thoughtful people, there will always be individuals who desire as their first tarantula such a species as *Pterinochilus murinus* or *Citharischius crawshayi*. This is especially true for those new to the hobby that acquired their first tarantula from a local pet shop or did not thoroughly research these creatures before acquiring their first specimen.

But, for whatever reason, there are hobbyists who acquire an African tarantula without going through the suggested logical progression of various tarantula species of varying degrees of temperament commonly advocated by many experienced enthusiasts. This article represents the basic knowledge useful in keeping and maintaining African theraphosids in captivity in a safe and responsible manner for both, the keeper and the kept.

African tarantulas are a part of a larger group of tarantulas that make up the Old

World Theraphosidae. Old World tarantulas range from Southern Europe down through Africa and from the Middle East eastward to Australia and Asian region.

African spiders and members of other Old World theraphosid genera are typically medium to large sized tarantulas with average leg spans of most species being in the four to eight inch range. However, smaller and larger species are out there. Most are terrestrial in lifestyle but arboreal genera and rare arboreal species within typically terrestrial genera do occur.

Currently, only a very small number of Africa's abundant tarantula species are available from dealers and breeders. Many species are captive bred in large numbers and range in price from a few dollars for the spiderlings of several species to several hundred dollars for adult females of the rarer or harder to breed species. Few collections are without at least one African tarantula.

It can be rare to encounter a specimen of any African tarantula species that does not display at least a moderate degree of defensiveness that may include slapping, with either the first and/or second pairs of legs, feigned lunges and defensive posturing in which the tarantula will elevate its body, remaining on the hind pair of legs while raising the front pair into the air. Some may spread the chelicerae and extend their fangs. Many will make a series of quick lunges and bites designed to dissuade would-be attackers. Regardless of the defensive tactics utilized, when working with these tarantulas, caution should be exercised.

It's best to acquire either a spiderling or young immature specimen of half an inch to

two inches. These smaller specimens will be easier to feed and maintain than larger immature and adults and will allow the new keeper to more slowly become accustomed to working with these animals. Another positive aspect of maintaining smaller specimens is that housing them will require little more than 40 to 50 dram clear plastic vials with snap-off caps for spiderlings up to a one inch legspan. For larger spiderlings and immatures, plastic 16 oz deli-cups with clear lids will do nicely. Resist the temptation to use lids or containers that are not transparent.

Another very important thing to remember is that even at the half-inch size, most spiderlings of the majority of African species are very capable of fast bursts of speed and can be out of a carelessly opened container and across a room in seconds! As with adult specimens, always know where your tarantula is in its container and try to disturb the container as little as possible during feedings and maintenance.

Another important factor is to limit the number of decorations in the cage. This will allow you to better view the spider's location. Never open a cage without knowing where your tarantula is.

When working with a specimen that has constructed a burrow it helps to have several pieces of half-inch plywood on hand to place over the burrow entrance(s). This practice will at least slow the tarantula down enough to close the lid securely if the specimen attempts an escape.

Always keep one or two clear plastic 16 or 32 oz deli containers with clear lids handy to trap escapees. Keep in mind that most fast moving tarantula species are capable of delivering a bite while moving at high speeds.

Long forceps are good for working in tall enclosures. Removing discarded prey remains, debris, and molted "skins" should all be done with forceps. Also useful for moving substrate in the enclosure or performing other maintenance tasks are various long-handled,

soft-bristled artist's paintbrushes and various sized long-handled wooden kitchen spoons.

Regardless of the size of your tarantula, plan to have various sized containers available to accommodate the tarantula's larger size later on. Along with larger deli containers, "Beanie Baby" cages can be useful. These containers are great to house small arboreal specimens, terrestrials and can be used for smaller deep burrowing species such as *H. gigas*. For tarantulas three inches or more legspan, plastic containers with vented lids are good because they are lighter, easier to stack, and the lids have a hatch that makes filling water dishes, feeding and some maintenance easier for the keeper. Another advantage includes the ventilation slots for good air exchange. For species that may need higher humidity levels, the ventilation holes can be covered plastic wrap to restrict airflow (but never completely restrict airflow).

Species from dry environments like *Ceratogyrus* and *Pterinochilus* need to drink also, and a small water container should be included. For species that are more moisture dependent, use deep water dishes with a large surface area to not only provide a source of water for drinking but to assist in keeping humidity levels elevated. Many individuals of *Hysteroocrates* may also enter their water dishes and completely immerse themselves in the water. Some speculation has it that some large West African tarantulas may actually hunt for prey in water.

The best way to avoid any bite is to work with these spiders cautiously. Always work quickly in the enclosure, and try not to create any disturbances that may cause the tarantula to interpret such a disturbance as an attack.

African tarantulas are a great addition to any collection, if your heart is set on getting one of these magnificent animals, always respect them for their defensive capabilities.