

# THE GREEN LIZARD

(*Lacerta Viridis*)

## IN CAPTIVITY

by Andrew Allen

THE GREEN LIZARD is one of the brightest and most lively members of the European Herpetofauna, and one that is easily obtainable in this country. It is the second largest European lacertid, and a specimen worthy of any collection. But the mortality rate in England must be enormous, as the lizards are housed in inadequate quarters and fed on unsatisfactory diets. It can be the most beautiful centrepiece of a vivarium or community, or can become a fickle specimen prone to illness.

It is easy to go wrong from the very start, in the selection of the lizards. When I first bought two individuals from a pet-shop, many years ago, I was handed two large, fine specimens, apparently in the peak of condition. But they were both males and harried each other unmercifully, while one was very old, and possessed of small blood-red ticks. They both died quickly, almost inevitable from the very start. So unless you can provide more than twenty square feet of floor space, choose only one male. All specimens, male or female, should be fairly young, and should be checked for ticks or other external parasites.

Having bought them, where are you going to keep them? If you have a vivarium or aquarium of four feet or above in length, then you will be able to lodge a true pair indoors. Place the vivarium in a sunny window, and provide it with one or more 60 watt light bulbs (out of reach of the lizards), to maintain the day temperature somewhere about the eighties Fahrenheit. A tight-fitting lid should be provided, with ample perforated zinc for ventilation. Interior design can be to your own tastes, but certain points should be noted. Drinking water is necessary, but in the indoor vivarium it need only be in a small dish a couple of inches in diameter. The flooring can be either a mixture of soil and peat, or ordinary aquarium gravel. The former should be of such a consistency that the lizards can construct their own burrows in it. A central flat stone should be placed beneath one of the light bulbs, and branches provided for climbing. The plants, which may make or mar an arrangement, should be chosen for their acceptance of fairly dry conditions. Cacti, succulents and variegated ivies are good choices.

There are problems about keeping *L. viridis* indoors, for it may resent the restricted conditions. The winter months are a cardinal problem. You can keep the

lizards awake throughout the winter, but you have the worry of knowing that you are shortening their life span, and disrupting their natural breeding cycles—possibly with unfortunate results. The other alternative is to hibernate the lizards “artificially.” This would consist of removing the light bulbs and accustoming the lizards to cooler temperatures in October, removing them to a cooler situation, and, when they become a little drowsy, filling the vivarium with dry leaves and removing it to a cold, but frost-proof, shed or garage. In the spring the vivarium should be constantly checked, and transferred indoors when the lizards show genuine signs of waking up. If the vivarium is too heavy to be manhandled into a shed, the lizards can be hibernated in a suitably padded, escape-proof wooden box. On awakening they should immediately be provided with drinking water and appetising food.

Keeping these lizards indoors is thus a somewhat risky business, fraught with pitfalls, and one that I cannot fully recommend. If possible it is far better to keep the lizards in more spacious outside accommodation, under considerably more natural conditions.

There are two possible types of outdoor accommodation. The first of these is the outdoor vivarium group, represented by greenhouse and lizard house. The greenhouse is an excellent way to keep this lizard, and allows the full development of a community. The lizards will enjoy the sunshine and warmth, and will hibernate naturally. Encouraged by their surroundings they will mate and breed, and demonstrate most of the habits exhibited in the wild state. They will become far tamer than in the indoor vivarium, despite the fact that they are no longer entirely dependent upon hand feeding. I have had no losses during hibernation over a period of more than five years of keeping green lizards in a greenhouse; for they choose their own hibernacula, which are eminently more suitable than any we could choose for them ourselves.

An equally good outdoor arrangement is the reptiliary, though great care must be exercised in its design and construction. The outer walls should be three feet high, and as smooth as possible. The ledge or overhang, the really vital part, should protrude nine inches into the vivarium, and be absolutely glass-smooth, without even the tiniest cracks. The reptiliary

must be in a position where it will catch every last ray of the sun, and away from any trees. All plants should be ruthlessly sheared off at about one and a half feet from the ground. Green lizards are superb and agile climbers, and a poorly designed reptiliary will give them very little test. If they manage to escape early on, then your money will have been wasted; but if they only escape once they have become established, then the likelihood is that they will return. If they do not manage to escape, the reptiliary will satisfy their every need, providing abundant sunlight and natural food from outside. Deep, well-drained soil must be available so that they can construct hibernacula in dry places well below the frost line. Even better, build a hibernating chamber which will guarantee immunity from the worst excesses of our coldest British winters. In a large reptiliary you will have ample opportunity to integrate the lizards into a wider community, and a large pond will not be out of place.

If you wish to associate these lizards in a community in greenhouse, reptiliary or outdoor vivarium, then my article on the subject in the January 1969 issue of *The Aquarist* may prove of assistance. If you wish to keep them with other reptiles in the indoor vivarium, then your choices are far more limited. No amphibian may be kept with them, for they will not tolerate the arid conditions. As most snakes would enjoy a green lizard for a snack, the choice is restricted to other lizard species. If the lizards are being hibernated then the choice is very small. Schrieber's lizard (*L. schrieberi*) is one possibility, as are young specimens of the eyed lizard (*L. ocellata*), and fully adult slow-worms (*A. fragilis*).

If the lizards are being over-wintered then a number of tropical and sub-tropical species may be considered as companions. Several of the medium-sized geckos such as adult *T. mauretanicus* will bring variety to the vivarium. Various zonures and the crag lizard (*pseudocordylus sp.*) will tolerate much the same conditions, as will many medium-sized skinks, such as the Mabuyas and various *Chalcides* species. Desert Agamas are feasible companions, but are not a species that is strongly recommended to the amateur. Desert, or semi-desert species should be chosen, and they must be comparable in size to the green lizards—for *L. viridis* has a reputation for cannibalism.

Bad regulation of feeding is another cause of mischief. The green lizard will eat a wide variety of food, and is not specialised in its tastes; thus monotony of diet is the main danger. All manner of insects, spiders, woodlice, slugs, stick-insects, centipedes, millipedes, earthworms and many other small invertebrates will be taken. Mealworms are a favourite item in the diet, but should be given with discretion, for they are a rich food with indigestible chaetae, and overfeeding can lead to various intestinal complaints. The lizards like to lick demerara sugar, or honey

perhaps, and also appreciate all manner of seedless fresh fruits, like the flesh of apple, orange, grape, plum and banana. The choice is wide, and finding food should present fewer problems than with most reptiles, but it must always be remembered that variety is the key to good health. The lizards are individualists, and will soon sort out their own preferences, and each reject a certain proportion of the offering. Seasonal food such as Crane flies and flying ants should be used to vary the diet, and if you have a greenhouse or reptiliary it is a good idea to establish an ants' nest in it. The lizards will dig up some of the grubs, the toads will enjoy the adult workers, and the flight of the Queens will be greatly appreciated by all the inhabitants, even such staid individuals as the newts.

It is hoped that this will give some guide to those considering keeping this lizard. It is a beautiful lizard, perhaps the most beautiful of all European lizards, and has a temperament to match. It will become so tame that it likes nothing better than to snooze for an hour on your shoulder, or make exploratory tugs at your ears or eyelids to test for edibility. Draped along a branch, basking in natural sunlight, it is a superb sight, a natural focus in any vivarium or reptiliary, however varied its companions may be.

But remember that it should be given only the most spacious and natural quarters, for a green lizard sulking in a small vivarium in a dark corner is a travesty; for its colours will soon become drab, and it will lose all the vicacity and liveliness that make it such an excellent inhabitant of the vivarium, reptiliary or greenhouse.

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