

CAGE FURNISHING

The furnishing of cages is largely at the discretion of the individual keeper, bearing in mind the natural habitat of the species to be housed. Naturally the arboreal geckos need material in which to climb. This can take the form of cut branches and twigs, replaced at intervals, or the more permanent solution of living plants in pots.

The choice of plants for growing in cages is largely up to the discretion of the keeper. Many have tried growing manuka in cages, but it can prove difficult to maintain, and is very susceptible to disease and drying out when its roots are restricted in small pots. Some of the small-leaved coprosmas do better, and have the kind of twiggy growth pattern which provides geckos with plenty of footholds. Pohutukawa also survive well in cage conditions, but their larger leaves make them less favoured by some geckos. Many introduced plants are quite suitable, and some small ornamental conifers are attractive and well used by the geckos. The so-called 'asparagus fern' is quite adaptable, as is ladder fern. Whatever plants you choose, the main points are that firstly they grow successfully in the cage situation, and secondly they are accepted by the geckos for climbing and basking. More detailed information is available in the file "Native Plants for Lizard Enclosures" (also downloadable from this website).

Geckos of all species need suitable places of shelter on the cage floor, which can include such items as rocks, pieces of wood, or bark. For those keepers who don't find them aesthetically displeasing, short pieces of polythene pipe can become favoured hiding places. Many geckos appreciate a basking site such as a rock or log judiciously placed to catch the sun as it comes through the wire mesh. Some nocturnal geckos may require protected basking sites, e.g. rocky niches which catch the sun for a period each day.

Many cages seem to have spare space at the top (i.e directly under the roof), and this is particularly so if the cage vegetation does not take up all of the available space. This space can be utilised by adding small hiding places either attached to the cage roof, or suspended from it. They can be small boxes with access holes, or pieces of large diameter bamboo. One idea which seems to work well is a cylinder of chicken wire stuffed with plant material such as manuka prunings, or similar. The mesh size should be such that the geckos can easily climb through them. The dried out plant material provides an ideal location for geckos to slough their skins.

There are two schools of thought on the use of natural materials such as soil, bark fragments or leaf mould as a floor covering in gecko cages. Such materials may be desirable if a natural appearance is required, and in large outdoor cages with some exposure to the weather, can develop their own populations of invertebrates which can add to the diet of the geckos. In some circumstances

though, a bare floor may be easier to keep in a hygienic condition. A natural habitat can never be exactly recreated in captivity, and a compromise must be reached which gives the animals conditions which are as natural as possible, but does not allow harmful contamination.

The amount of available living space in a cage can be increased by providing a stack of boards separated by wooden spacers, leaving gaps of about 1 - 1.5 cm to provide secure hiding places for the geckos. Larger gaps will be needed for *H. duvaucelii*. It is advisable to nail the spacers to the boards so they cannot be displaced and allow the geckos to be squashed. This kind of set-up can allow greater numbers to be kept in a cage of a given size, but there is a disadvantage. If the cage gets too hot, the temperature in the narrow gaps between the boards may rise more rapidly than in the rest of the cage, and animals sheltering there may be liable to heat stress and even death. Keep board stacks out of full sun if possible, particularly in mid summer.

For detailed information on NZ native plants suitable for growing in lizard cages, please see separate PDF file on this topic.