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Green Tree Python Is One Expensive Pet

By LINDA LOMBARDI

Know how to make a small fortune breeding green tree pythons?

“You start with a large fortune,” advises Rico Walder of Signal Mountain, Tenn.

With prices commonly in the \$1,000-\$5,000 range - and exceptional specimens going for more than \$10,000 - these snakes might sound like a gold mine. But those figures reflect the challenges of keeping the temperamental reptiles, and the gamble inherent in breeding them for the most desirable characteristics: beauty and color.

A passionate community has grown up around the green tree python, which drapes itself over a branch in an unusual posture of concentric loops that perfectly displays its hues and patterns.

“They don't hide under the substrate or dig into a plant pot,” says Walder. “They sit on the branch and look visually stunning.”

In nature, the green tree python is, mostly, green. But its spots and patterns of yellow, white and blue give breeders the genetic material to produce animals never seen in the wild, with interestingly unpredictable results.

“The color that they come out is not random, but it's kind of an unknown,” says longtime breeder Tim Morris, a schoolteacher in Ellicott City, Md. “You can breed these animals and every single one in the litter is different.”

Morris is credited by many for having produced the first all-blue green tree python. Given the high prices that blue specimens command, you might think he'd simply keep repeating that success. But that isn't his priority.

“I guess some people would like to master breeding two blue animals together and getting blue offspring,” he says. “But when you mix them together, you get new things - that's part of the fascination with them. There's no other snake that I can think of where you get this kind of variation.”

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Waiting to see those new things can be excruciating, though. The snakes mate fairly readily, but everything else about their reproductive cycle is chancy, compared to most commonly bred snake species.

``It's a little more challenging to get fertile eggs, and more of a challenge for some of these designer types," says Morris. ``The eggs seem to be more fragile, compared to other python eggs - the incubation procedures seem to be more touchy. They're very prone to full term stillborn babies."

Even if the young hatch successfully, you still don't know what color they are. Born either bright yellow or a hue of maroon to brick red, they don't change to their adult color until they are 6 to 12 months old.

There's no reliable way to predict how a baby will look as an adult, but given the expense and difficulty of raising them - on top of everything else, they are often fussy eaters - keeping all the offspring until they change doesn't necessarily make economic sense. What's more, some buyers want baby snakes so they can watch the process.

``Some change a scale at a time, some go through stages of different colors, some change all at once," Walder says.

So the decision of which to sell and which to buy - and at what price - is based on the snake's lineage. As with race horses or show dogs, breeders keep pedigrees going back generations, and the names of certain animals are spoken with the kind of familiarity accorded to thoroughbreds like Secretariat or Man O'War.

Such records are unusual for reptile breeding - ``I don't know of any other snake where you'll get a lineage that's 30 years old," says Morris - and it's obviously valuable information. But you still can't predict a blue snake with any more certainty than you can predict a Triple Crown winner.

``It's a buyer's gamble. I've kept back some babies that I thought would be exciting that weren't. I've sold some that looked normal and they turned out to be the stars of the clutch," Morris says.

Of course, shopping is different nowadays because of the Internet - green tree pythons included. When Walder and Morris started out, the only source was classified ads in reptile magazines.

``You had to buy sight unseen just from a description on a price list," recalls Walder. Now, ``there are probably some people out there who know my collection better than I do."

Hobbyists share pictures and information online, and follow each other's breeding attempts like soap opera fans, familiar with the characters and their histories.

The Internet has unified the community, and given it a more global reach. But in other ways, it's narrowed the focus. Walder recalls when people used to meet at the local herpetological society:

``In the old days there was a different topic and a different speaker every month." Now, if you're obsessed with one color of a particular species, ``you can go hang out with other people who are just as crazy as you are."

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