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A reptile even Mom can love

The pettable, low-maintenance leopard gecko is easy to handle

By **Linda Lombardi**
For The Associated Press

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If you're a kid who likes reptiles, life can be tough.

"My mom doesn't really like snakes. With snakes you have to feed them mice and stuff like that," says Joseph Ferlise, 11, of Baltimore. "My mom wasn't too thrilled about that."

Fortunately for Joseph, his aunt, high-school teacher Mary Roman Gunther, is a former animal keeper, so she knows her critters. For his 9th birthday, she gave him a leopard gecko.

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zoom

Good rep: Joseph Ferlise, 11, shows off Jay, his pet leopard gecko, at his home in Baltimore. It must be fed live food over the course of a long life, which can stretch to 14 years. - Steve Ruark / Associated Press

Gunther also knew that leopard geckos were a good first reptile pet because her own son, Patrick, had had his gecko Ozzie since he was 14.

They're easy to handle, Gunther says, "especially if you get them when they're very young and you handle them and train them to accept it," Gunther says. "Put them on your shoulder when they're little and they'll learn to hang on."

Leopard geckos are low-maintenance. "Mothers like them because they're the only gecko that doesn't have toe pads -- so it can't climb out of the tank and get away," she says.

Gunther kept a lid on her gecko tank, but more to keep the cats from getting in than to keep the gecko from getting out.

They do eat live food, so know your children. "Are they going to freak out if they have to feed them live crickets or mealworms?" says Gunther.

Small and cute

But otherwise, leopard geckos are a good choice for a family where not everyone is on board with the idea of a little cold-blooded friend. They're small, an average of 8 inches, and cute -- their upcurved mouths seem to smile. Their skin even feels soft to the touch rather than scaly.

"It's fun to feel his bumpy sort of skin -- it's soft but hard," says Joseph.

"They're definitely a good starter reptile," according to Chris Houck, lifelong reptile aficionado and owner of Today's Pet stores in Annapolis and Frederick, Md.

A leopard gecko can be kept in a fairly simple 10-gallon tank. Unlike the tropical gecko, they are a nocturnal desert animal, so they don't need a lot of plants, high humidity or special lighting. Houck recommends a heat rock with a thermostat to avoid overheating, and a den or cave that's kept moist to help the lizard shed.

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"A little bit of bark bedding soaked in water will help keep the humidity up. You can tell they're in shed when they get a white discolored look."

Geckos can be kept on a variety of substrates, but don't use sand for young ones. They can ingest it when catching crickets. They tend to defecate in one spot, making cleanup easy, and their droppings are inoffensive, so smell isn't a problem.

Leopard geckos are widely bred in captivity and easily available in stores, but like any pet, you need to buy from a reliable source to get a [healthy](#) animal.

"You always want to research a pet before you go in to purchase it," says Houck. "Then, if you feel like you know more about the animal than the sales staff, that should raise questions."

For most reptiles, it can be hard for an amateur -- or even sometimes a professional -- to diagnose poor health. But one advantage of leopard geckos is that they have at least one obvious indicator, in their fat tail.

"The health is determined by the fatness of their tail. If it has a thin tail, it's either malnutrition or it's dehydrated," says Houck.

Healthy critters

If properly set up and fed, your gecko should have few health issues. Houck says that most problems stem from errors in tank placement: Pick a spot that's not drafty, and not too near a window, which can cause extremes in temperature.

One important thing to know about leopard geckos is that they are long-lived -- Gunther's son's gecko recently passed away at the age of 14. But unlike something like an iguana, it will never outgrow its 10-gallon tank. And even if Mom ends up caring for it after the kids have left for college, it won't interfere too much with her lifestyle.

"You don't have to worry, 'Oh, gosh, we're going to the beach for the weekend; what are we going to do?' " says Gunther. "Make sure it's got water and throw in a few mealworms. It's no big deal."

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