

Arboreal Alligator Lizards (*Abronia* species)

Introduction to Arboreal Alligator Lizards

For more than 20 years, the Arboreal Alligator Lizards of Central America were only a dream to most reptile hobbyists. They were kept and bred in Europe but the prices were exorbitantly high and getting these somewhat fragile lizards to survive the four or five day journey to the United States was a gamble many keepers were unwilling to risk. Every few years, photos of the incredibly beautiful *Abronia graminea* with its emerald green and turquoise blue body and yellow eye rings would be published in a reptile book or magazine and American keepers would gasp at their beauty. Fortunately for herpetoculture, these living gems arrived into the hobby in 2012 from a variety of sources and have spread quickly throughout the hobby.

These remarkable lizards are endemic to mountainous pine, oak forests of Mexico and Guatemala and include 29 currently recognized species. These secretive lizards live in clusters of bromeliads high in the trees of tropical cloud forests. They are small, reaching an adult length of 6" to 8" (with a couple of species reaching 10 to 11"), have muscular jaws, expressive eyes, and prehensile tails for climbing.

Some species, particularly *A. lythrochila*, *A. frosti*, and *A. vasconcelosii* have interesting spiny horn-like scales above the ears on each side of the head in both males and females.

Abronia species give live birth, producing 3-8 young once a year.

Housing Arboreal Alligator Lizards

Abronia, especially juveniles to adults, are best housed separately. They are not social in nature and males and even females will often fight in captivity. There are numerous reports of young *Abronia* attacking and killing their siblings. They can be housed in small glass terrariums with screen tops. Ten-gallon enclosures will work well for small specimens and adults of most species will require 20-gallon or 29-gallon terrariums (that provide more height than horizontal space). If kept in glass terrariums, a keeper should place a small computer fan on top of the cage to produce some air flow within. Many keepers keep these lizards in screen cages. If they are housed in a screen cage, a misting system must be added to keep these lizards from drying out. Dehydration will kill these lizards fairly quickly, especially smaller specimens.

The substrate for an *Abronia* enclosure should consist of 1-3" of a soil mix. We suggest 75% finely ground peat moss and 25% play sand with a top layer of cypress mulch (to hold in moisture). Sphagnum moss, Spanish moss, crumbled dead leaves, and other additions will help produce some humid areas as well as allowing an area for these secretive lizards to hide.

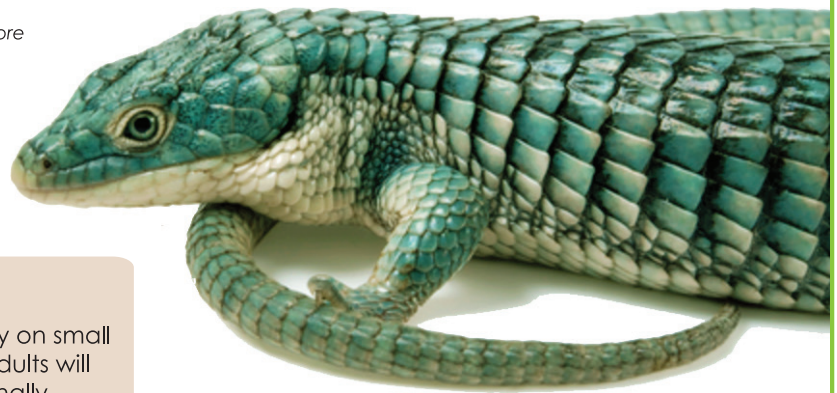
Heating and Lighting Arboreal Alligator Lizards

These lizards are active during the day in cool, humid forests in Central America so they do require UVB radiation. We add UVB-emitting lamps in a fixture over the enclosure and rest a small puck light (halogen) on the screen top to produce a focused basking area in one corner of their enclosure. Add several small branches both vertically and horizontally within the enclosure to provide areas for climbing and for the small lizards to find appropriate areas to thermoregulate. Remember that, care must be taken that these lizards do not overheat. Their ideal temperature range is 65° to 75° F. A small, focused basking area can reach 85° F but care must be taken, especially if you are housing your *Abronia* in glass terrariums as these can heat up to lethal temperatures quite quickly. Lastly, several small epiphytic plant species can be placed in each of the terrariums. This will offer them a humid area of shade and shelter.

Watering Arboreal Alligator Lizards

Dehydration is a common cause of death in *Abronia* in captivity. Enclosures should be sprayed for 3-5 minutes, once in the morning, then once again in the late afternoon. These animals will very rarely drink out of a shallow water dish, choosing instead to drink from droplets on the leaves and branches.

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Feeding Arboreal Alligator Lizards

In the wild, adult specimens of *Abronia* feed predominantly on small spiders, insects, and will even eat scorpions. In captivity, adults will eagerly accept small crickets, small roaches, and occasionally mealworms and waxworms. Young lizards will prefer fruit flies, bean beetles, and "pinhead" crickets. Adults can be fed three to four times a week and young lizards should be offered food daily or every other day. We prefer to offer smaller prey insects more often rather than larger prey items.

