



LIFESTYLE

Did you know that in the right conditions, hermit crabs can actually live for up to 30 years?

Hermit crabs are complex little creatures that need a highly controlled environment to survive and live a happy, long life. They are very interesting animals and can be kept as pets, but only if their home is properly maintained. It is important not to leave the specialised care of these little critters up to a child, as they are quite high maintenance!

FRIENDS

Hermit crabs are actually not hermits at all. As they are social animals, it is important to have at least three crabs living together in the tank. The more crabs there are, the more active they will be, but avoid overcrowding as this can cause stress. They are mostly nocturnal animals so they can be pretty noisy if kept in the bedroom at night!

HOUSING OR 'CRABITAT'

The small plastic box that you may have received when you purchased your hermit crab is not adequate shelter.

Rather a glass tank size of at least 30 litres filled with moist sand at least 15 centimetres deep will enable burrowing and moulting, as hermit crabs spend 1-2 months underground to moult.

There should be a lid on the tank but make sure air can enter. It's vital that the tank remains humid, as hermit crabs are naturally found in the tropics and they breathe air through modified gills. Humidity of at least 75% is needed for them to survive and this can be achieved with a mister and a humidity gauge. Moss and sea sponges also help keep humidity between 70-80%. A lamp or heater can be used to keep the tank's temperature at approximately 24-27 degrees.

Be sure to provide places for the crabs to climb and hide, eg half an empty dried out coconut shell, unpainted clay flowerpots, branches or rocks.

When cleaning out the tank, never use detergent or soap as they can be harmful to hermit crabs. Poisoning can also occur through using sprays such as deodorant, hairspray or cleaning products near the tank.

NUTRITION

Hermit crabs need bowls of both de-chlorinated fresh and salt water. To neutralise the chlorine, add water-conditioning fluid to the water. The salt water cannot be made with table salt, so use sea salt instead. Both

bowls of water need to be big enough for the crabs to climb into and it is essential that they are able to crawl out again so that they don't drown. A rock or piece of sea sponge can be placed inside the bowl to help them get in and out.

Offer fruit, vegetables and grains as well as some meat, as hermit crabs are omnivores. It is good to vary the food each day so that the crab receives a well-balanced diet. Remove any food not eaten regularly so that it doesn't rot in the tank.

Crabs require additional calcium, so also add a piece of cuttlebone to the tank.

SHELLS

Hermit crabs live in other animals' discarded shells. As they grow, they seek out a larger shell to move into, so a few spare shells should be placed in their tank. Provide at least three shells per crab - one slightly smaller, one about the same size, and one larger shell.

Hermit crabs are often purchased with a painted shell - these can be toxic in the long term. The paint can even make the shell too heavy for them to move around in.

HANDLING

If the hermit crab is buried under the sand, do not disturb him as he may be moulting. This occurs approximately twice yearly and can be a stressful time for the crab, so it is important not to handle them during or straight after this process. Leave the old skin in the tank as a calcium rich snack.

At other times, hermit crabs can be gently handled by walking them across your hand close to the ground or over a sofa or bed so that they do not fall and hurt themselves. Pick up the crab at the back of the shell - never at the front. If you are nervous about being pinched by a crab claw, wear some gloves to get used to the handling.

Most importantly, research hermit crabs before you buy one to see if they are right for you - they are not as simple as they might first seem!



VET TALK
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