



Handle with care

Giant African land snails

Species: Giant African land snail

Scientific names: ***Achatina fulica***; ***Achatina marginata*** or ***Achatina achatina***

Description

Giant African land snails have dark brown shells with fawn and white markings; their bodies are brown and patterned with purple, white and fawn marks.

Depending on the species, a land snail's shell can measure between 10-20cm long, with the less commonly kept *Achatina achatina* species being the largest land snail.

Life in the wild

Giant African land snails are nocturnal (most active at night) and native to damp areas of Africa, south of the Sahara.

Source of animals

Most land snails available through the UK pet trade are captive bred. Your local veterinary surgeon may be able to advise on a reputable source or your nearest RSPCA animal centre may know of snails that need rehoming.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a giant African land snail, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity, how big it gets and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is stable before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Your veterinary surgeon will advise on the costs of consultations. Holiday cover is also needed to ensure your snails are looked after properly every day for the time that you are away by someone who understands their complex needs.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy snail will have a clean, unbroken shell and no unusual lumps, bumps and patches on its body. Small white patches on its skin may indicate a problem that needs to be treated by a vet. A snail that does not come out of its shell may be suffering from dehydration.

Why are land snails vulnerable in captivity?

Giant African land snails are completely dependent upon their owners to be provided with the correct accommodation, heating, humidity, lighting and food, all of which must reflect as closely as possible their wild habitat. Without correct care they will suffer with skin, shell and digestive problems and eventually die. They are susceptible to dehydration from overheating and too much sunlight, and can be killed if chemicals, insecticides and detergents are used around or in their home. Chemicals in packaged garden compost are also lethal to snails.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Snails should be picked up very gently by their shells – it is best to pick them up when they are resting on the soil on the floor of their home rather than when they are stuck tightly to its glass. Young snails have very fragile shells and great care should be taken when moving them. The ideal way to move a land snail is to encourage it to move on to a leaf and then move the leaf and snail together.

Health issues to find out about

- Dehydration.
- Calcium deficiency.
- Exposure to chemicals.
- Skin problems.
- Broken shells.

These snails can be transported in sturdy plastic boxes with secure, but well ventilated lids. Ensure they do not dry out by including some damp, clean tissue in the box. Care should also be taken to ensure the snails do not get too cold or overheat during the journey.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Giant African land snails need a well-ventilated glass or sturdy plastic tank with a secure lid. Snails will soon climb out of open tanks. Wooden enclosures are unsuitable as they will be chewed and splinters can cause injury to any occupants. The enclosure should be kept out of direct sunlight, away from radiators, out of draughts and also away from where chemicals and insecticides, including fly and flea sprays, are likely to be used. Any chemical the snail comes into contact with is quickly absorbed through the skin and can be toxic.

Two land snails will need an enclosure measuring 60cm long x 45cm wide x 40cm high. More snails will need a larger tank. The enclosure should have 3-6cm layer of peat substitute on the floor that needs to be kept damp but not soaking. Avoid using soil from the garden as it may be too stony and include fertilizer or other chemicals that are harmful to snails. The snails will bury themselves in the substrate.

Snails should be kept at a temperature of 21-23°C to maintain normal growth. A heat pad can be used under half of the tank, unless the room in which they are kept maintains the appropriate temperature. Higher temperatures encourage faster growth, but care needs to be taken to monitor the temperature in the tank with a thermometer to prevent it getting cooler than 18°C and warmer than 29°C. If the conditions are too hot, cold or dry the snail will hide and become inactive, and a thin muco-calcareous skin may form over the aperture of the shell. The snail may then aestivate (become dormant) for several months or even die if the temperature is very low. Extra lighting is not needed for snails if the room in which the tank is located is already lit by indirect natural sunlight. Giant African land snails will avoid coming out in bright light.

A water bowl should be placed in the enclosure for the snails to drink from and to help keep the humidity at the right level. The tank should also be misted lightly with warm water every other day to maintain the moderate level of humidity.

Leafy greens including lettuce, cabbage, spinach, watercress, land cress, dandelions and grass should all be on the land snail's menu. They will also eat vegetables and fruit such as courgettes, cucumber, apples, melons, grapes and bananas. The food should be chopped, washed to remove all traces of harmful chemicals and then spread out on the substrate or fed to the snail in a shallow dish. Any food not eaten within 24 hours should be removed. Calcium is also an important part of a land snail's diet for normal formation and growth of the snail's shell. Calcium can be provided by giving the snail a cuttlefish bone, natural chalk, crushed eggshells or as a powdered supplement sprinkled on the food. A very shallow bowl of water should be provided, as a snail can drown in anything more than a few millimeters of water.

Snails can be kept alone or in groups. It is important to remember that snails are hermaphrodite, so are both male and female. Keeping two snails together of the same size is likely to result in the snails breeding, which means you will also have to care for any offspring.

The glass walls of the tank should be regularly washed as required to keep them clear of the mucus and droppings that are left by the snails. The substrate should be changed weekly at the same time the tank is thoroughly washed with warm water, without the use of any detergents or disinfectants that are harmful to the snails. The clean substrate and any snails are then put back into the tank.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.