

How to Care For Your New Degu

written by Carraig Stanwyck

Biography

Everyone knows the saying “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” In the world of the Degu “One man’s pest is another man’s pleasure.” Considered a threat to crops and plantations in their homeland of Chile, Degus have faced prejudice and persecution there for countless years. In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s their luck changed when scientists found that the natural diet of the Degu was extremely low in sugar. This made them a prime candidate for diabetes research and gave them a ticket to freedom in America. Degus’ status as lab animals quickly turned into pet status as more and more people fell in love with these adorable animals and found they made great pets too.

About the same size as a common pet-store rat, Degus have a soft brown coat, big ears, a tuft on their tail, and bright, inquisitive eyes. At first glance some say that a Degu looks like a gerbil but the resemblance ends there. Upon closer examination its face is more squirrel like, its posture unique, and the Degu’s eyes shine with an intelligence that most rodents don’t have. Despite the misinformation widely disseminated on the internet, Degus are classified as rodents of the sub-order Hystricognathi much like Chinchillas, Guinea Pigs, and Old-World Porcupines. They are not currently considered to be related to Lagomorphs like rabbits and pikas although there is some debate among biologists on whether they should be.

Choosing Your New Pet

You’ve decided that you’re up to the challenge of Degu ownership. The next step is finding and selecting your perfect pet. In recent years the popularity of the Degu has skyrocketed but, compared to common pet-store animals, they are still relatively rare. Here at TCFexotics we’ve solved that problem for you. Our breeders are the finest available and their babies will delight you for many years to come. When choosing your Degu you should ensure that its eyes are bright and clear, its fur isn’t greasy, its teeth are yellow or orange, and it has a generally healthy appearance to it. If a Degu’s teeth are white, it’s a very sick animal. There is a chemical reaction between the Degu’s saliva and the chlorophyll in the plants that causes this coloration phenomenon. The other major point to consider is the loneliness of a single Degu. They are very social animals and in many ways require Degu companionship to stay happy. Here at TCFexotics we advise at least two Degus per enclosure. Unlike some pets, no matter how tame your Degu is, it will always prefer Degu companionship to human companionship. Because we feel the animal’s well-being comes first, we will not sell lone Degus unless they are to supplement an existing colony.

Housing

If you’ve ever tried to go to sleep in the same room as a Degu colony you learned that they are very active animals. So active, in fact, that your standard 10 gallon aquarium is much too small. The minimum enclosure size for a pair of Degus is a 20 gallon aquarium. Here at TCFexotics we use 50 gallon aquariums for breeding trios and

they do very well. The general rule of thumb is Bigger is Always Better! I've heard of Degu owners having great luck with wire cages, but with wire cages there are a couple of things to keep in mind. The bar spacing must be 1" x 1/2" or smaller and all of the floor space must be solid. Besides food and water there are three absolute necessities in every Degu colony's cage. These are a nest box, a large exercise wheel, and safe material to chew on such as toilet paper tubes and nontoxic tree branches. When choosing bedding it's best to stay away from pine and cedar shavings. There isn't much scientific research indicating softwood beddings are unhealthy but years of trial and error among breeders have shown that beddings like pine and cedar cause more medical problems than any other bedding. Here at TCFexotics we use and promote Aspen shavings and other recycled newspaper based beddings.

Food and Water

It would be so nice to be able to recommend a good, high quality, Degu food. At the time of this writing, however, no such thing exists. Degus are still too new in the pet market and food manufacturers prefer to stick to the more common pets. Here at TCFexotics we use a high quality Guinea Pig or Chinchilla pellet diet with Timothy Hay (sometimes sold as Pet Grass) available at all times. For treats we feed the occasional raisin or sunflower seed a couple times per week. Degus also love vegetables but these must be given in moderation. We suggest that if you feed fresh vegetables give no more than one square inch per day per Degu.

Fresh filtered water should be available at all times. Degus are prone to mouth disease so the water should be free of chlorine and other chemicals. You may not notice them drinking very much but without water they will quickly die from dehydration. Water can be provided either in a water dish or in a water bottle. We use ceramic water dishes because the Degus just love to chew up the water bottles we've tried in the past. A block of wood makes a great place to put a water dish and keeps the bedding out of it as well.

Note: Unless the water bottle is covered in its entirety with a metal guard the Degus will chew a hole in it.