

## *Boa Constrictor*



**Common Names:** Central American or Columbian boa

**Latin Name:** (*B. c. imperator*)

**Description:**

The *B. c. imperator* is often mistaken for the red-tail boa (*B. c. constrictor*). Red-tails are generally heavier-bodied and larger than common boas, but the variation in pattern and coloration often means that there is confusion between the two subspecies. Particularly attractive common boas can display the trademark red colors of the true red-tails, and many imported specimens are labeled and sold as red-tails.

The common boa is an inexpensive yet beautiful snake, and captive bred animals are readily found today. Many have spectacular patterns and a calm disposition. Though not classed as a giant species, the boa can grow relatively large and at maximum can obtain lengths of around ten feet, although six to nine feet is the average for a normal adult, with females usually growing larger than males. The boa's sheer size and strength mean that it is generally a snake better suited to the intermediate herpetoculturist.

The common boa has a gentle temperament, although, as with all animals, exceptions do exist at the individual and species level. Imported, wild-caught animals are often irritable,

take a long time to settle into a captive environment, can be difficult feeders and are often suffering from internal and external parasites. A captive bred specimen is a better choice, and captive boas are often great de-frost feeders, easy to care for with the correct housing advice provided, and are regularly available.

### **Housing:**

Allowing the snake as much room as you can physically and financially afford is ideal, but an enclosure that is a minimum of four to six feet in length, or two-thirds the length of the snake, is necessary for an adult common boa. They are adept climbers, though not arboreal, and heavy branches will allow the snake to make good use of vertical space if you wish to provide the height and the furniture. Younger boas are likely to make more use of climbing accessories, as the heaviness of the more mature snake makes providing strong enough branches more difficult. Neonates will feel more secure in smaller enclosures, and juveniles can be housed in a 10 gallon vivarium. Consideration must be applied to the growth rate and adult size of the boa and you must be prepared to update the size of the enclosure as the snake grows. Wooden, glass, metal or plastic can all be used to suit your preference, but certain materials may be more suitable for the size of the enclosure needed.

Cage furniture can be simple or decorative, but hides must be provided, preferably at both ends of the enclosure so that the snake does not have to choose between temperature and security.

### **Water:**

Fresh clean water should be made available at all times in a large water bowl, if possible one that is big enough to allow the snake to soak in if it chooses to, however prolonged soaking may be indicative that humidity is too low. A large water bowl will increase humidity if needed, though common boas require only moderate humidity levels, which should be raised when the snake is in shed. Problems associated with dry conditions include poor shedding and dry skin. Similarly, humidity that is too high can also cause health problems, such as scale rot and respiratory infections.

### **Heating:**

Boas, like all reptiles, are ectothermic (cold-blooded), and are unable to generate heat internally, so a heat source must be supplied in their enclosure. This can be in the form of heat mats or pads, light bulbs or a ceramic heating element, and the use of a thermostat will ensure that temperatures remain accurate and constant. A thermostat will also prevent burns from appliances overheating, and if a bulb or ceramic heater is used they should be situated out of the snakes reach, or be properly guarded, to avoid harm to the snake. A temperature gradient must be provided in order to allow the snake to thermo regulate. Being a tropical species, common boas require high temperatures. The warm end of the enclosure should be around 85 Fahrenheit (29°C), with a basking area of 92 Fahrenheit (33°C). The cooler side should be in the low 80s Fahrenheit (26-28°C) and you can allow a nighttime drop of a few degrees. Improper temperatures can lead to an unhealthy snake. Without sufficient heat, adequate digestion and disease resistance cannot be ensured, and temperatures that are too high can lead to health problems such as heat stress and dehydration.

**Lighting:**

A photoperiod of 12 hours daylight and 12 hours night is ample, although this can be altered to mimic seasonal changes. This may be particularly beneficial when inducing winter brumation in preparation for breeding, with a reduced daytime period of 8-10 hours. The photoperiod can be artificially provided with the use of light bulbs or tubes, or, if enough ambient light is present from windows, the natural photoperiod is fine.

**Feeding:**

In the wild, rodents, other small mammals and birds make up the main diet of the boa. Lizards and frogs may occasionally be consumed, but a diet consisting solely of frozen-thawed rodents is adequate in captivity. Snakes are capable of eating items that are one- one and a half times the thickest part of their girth, but often more food items that are smaller are easier to digest than one large food item. It is healthier for the snake as a pet to be fed moderate quantities on a regular basis. Boas under a year in age can be fed every five to seven days, and active or growing boas once a week. A neonate can be started on rat pups or small mice, and the amount of food can be gradually increased as the snake grows. An adult will consume much larger prey, such as large rats and rabbits, and due to their slower growth rate and reduced activity, can be fed less often. Once every two to four weeks, depending on the size and age of the individual, is adequate. The debate surrounding frozen, fresh-killed and live food is on going; however common boas generally have brilliant appetites and will readily accept thawed feeders. If a neonate is a difficult starter, or if you have obtained a grown-on boa that has been used to eating live prey, you may need to feed live rodents and switch to pre-killed and then frozen-thawed. A snake should never be left with a live feeder unsupervised as, even in the constricting coils of a boa constrictor; a live food item can harm the snake. Frozen items have many advantages over live; they are less expensive, readily available, pose no threat to the snake and have reduced risk of parasites. Each snake has its own individual preference when it comes to feeding time, but the common boa is not a shy species and will often readily strike feed when food is offered with tongs.

**Additional Information:**

The name constrictor comes from the strength of these stunning snakes, and the way in which they kill their prey, by coiling around the animal to cause death by asphyxiation and pressure exerted on the heart and circulatory system. However, many other snakes are also constrictors, and the boa is undeserving of the associations and reputation resulting from its name. A boa will not deliberately crush a person, and constricting behavior while being handled is usually only caused by the snakes fear of falling. If your boa becomes frightened and begins constricting, remain calm and gently unwrap the snake like a scarf. For safety to the animal and yourself it is advisable not to handle a boa over six feet long alone.

The common boa is an attractive species and makes a fine addition to any collection. Captive bred specimens are easily obtainable and they are strong, solid snakes with a good feeding and breeding reputation. The robust constitution and calm temper of this gentle giant make the common boa a desirable snake.