

Got the Bug? Insects make a great pet



Right now I know five people who keep bugs as pets. Only one of them is nuts. Over the years I have treated about twenty bugs for a variety of problems, everything from dehydration, parasites, broken legs, infections, etc.

I refer to these animals as bugs because the people who keep spiders get very exercised when I refer to their eight-legged friends as insects. They quickly point out that insects have six legs; arachnids — the spiders — have eight legs. Those two extra legs mean a great

deal to the spider owners. You will have to take my word for it, but those two extra legs make spider people feel superior to the owners of mere insects. Insect owners shrug off this derision with comments like “I don’t know, I really like cockroaches,” or “Walking sticks are really under-appreciated.” This social cache is similar to that exhibited by new model Volvo salespeople about the used car salesman of vintage Volkswagon Beetles. I am not going to bring up scorpion people.

“Spiders are just more interesting, and more intelligent, than insects,” says Stephen Martin of Hull. He is one of those five bug owners.

The thing that is striking about this field of pet ownership is its diversity. It is not surprising when you consider how many species there are to be had. In the insect world alone there are more than 600,000 species to choose from. There are over 37,000 species of spiders. And 10,000 species of millipedes. Of course not all are good candidates to care for. You don’t want to get all cooey about an animal that you can barely see. You don’t want something that will eat your clothing, or will inhabit your refrigerator, bite you, sting you, or even eat you. So that pares things down a bit. The most common insects that are kept as pets are crickets, ants, roaches, walking sticks, mantids, and ant lions. (One of the most common insects kept, of course, is the honeybee, and for apparent reasons is not considered a pet but a farm animal.) In the spider world the most common are tarantulas

Keeping bugs as pets is not a new thing. Crickets have a 2000, and perhaps 4000 year history of being kept as pets. The Chinese, like so many things, started early in cricket care and culture. In fact China had a minister of crickets, Jia Shi-Dao, from 1213-1275.

If you want to start caring for any of these categories of insects, the fastest way to information is to type in to your search engine the name of the bug you are interested in and follow it with the word ‘care’. Try ‘roach care’ and you will end up with volumes of care instructions on how to raise roaches. You will find many citations in each category.

Most are easy to care for. Most require a glass sided terrarium with a tape barrier at the top to keep insects from walking away and taking over the house. Most require water in a shallow lid, or a soaked sponge. Most require a heating pad to raise the temperature slightly. Most require cardboard egg cartons as hiding places. Individual species have their own food sources which,

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once again are easy to acquire. Predatory insects are probably the hardest because you need to find other insects to feed them.

I like having insects as pets, but my approach is a little different than that of the 'keeper'. I think I would be referred to as a partial keeper, or perhaps a seasonal keeper. I don't own my bugs, I let my bugs live their natural lives. I do little to create cages, terrariums or restraint. I like spiders, preying mantids and houseflies.

The spiders come in a variety of species and most live outside my window or in the garden. Here I find them, identify them and feed them. There are the black and yellow argiopes, the orb web garden spiders, and the funnel web spiders. I find half dead moths, crane flies and a host of other flies and assist my pet friends by giving them the booty I've found. I do not spend much time watching them but I do check in on them throughout the summer almost everyday. When the season ends, so do my pets. I have tried keeping them indoors but they fail shortly after the season ends anyway.

I do the same with preying mantids when I find them. They have a tendency to wander in search of food so my interaction with them is left only to occasional contacts. They are also so well camouflaged that re-finding them is difficult. I will package them up in my house in a terrarium for a day or two to watch and learn and then send them on their way from whence they came.

House flies! Are perhaps my favorite. I know, I know, you just figured out who the crazy one is. I catch houseflies in my hand and pop them into the freezer of my refrigerator for twelve seconds. This dulls them down to inactivity. I then take a very small thread, like a single strand of nylon from a nylon stocking or rope, and tie it around the fly's neck. It takes a little practice but you get good at it fairly quickly. You do not want to pull the knot too tight or you will decapitate your pet. Now you have a fly on a leash!

You can take your fly for walks indoors or outdoors, show your fly things you would like to show them, and you can show your fly to others. When you tire of your pet fly, you can pop it pack into the freezer and then carefully snip the thread with a finger nail clipper. Your fly then returns to the wild free to do fly things again.

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