

## Care guide

### Garantuan Stick Insect, *Ctenomorpha gargantua*



Gargantuan Stick Insects are considered Australia's largest and most spectacular phasmid. The longest individuals (females) recorded so far measure around 58cm from the end of the cerci to the tip of the front legs. Males are smaller and thinner than females, but still an impressive size. Males have fully developed functional wings and are able to fly to find females, whereas the wings of the females are not functional for flight. This species is thought to live high in the rainforest canopy and are rarely seen in the wild due to these habits and their excellent camouflage.

They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, beginning with the eggs being tossed individually by females from the trees down to the forest floor. A single female may lay over 800 eggs in a lifetime. The eggs look very much like plant seeds and hatching occurs mostly during daylight hours.

After hatching, the baby stick insects (nymphs) must make their way into a tree. The nymphs are brown and twig-like at this stage and use their appearance to blend into the small growth at the tips of branches.

Once in a tree they begin to feed on leaves and grow by shedding their outer skeleton (exoskeleton). This process is called ecdysis or moulting. To moult successfully the insect needs to hang uninterrupted beneath a leaf or branch. This can take 10mins to half an hour.

An amazing fact about many phasmids is that they are parthenogenetic. This means that females don't need to be mated to reproduce. So if you only have a single female, she can still produce young - replicas of herself.

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**Food:** Various *Eucalyptus* spp. (Gum), *Syzygium australe* (Lilly Pilly/Brush Cherry) and *Corymbia torelliana* (Cadagi). Ensure fresh, healthy leaves are always available to your insect. Don't let the leaves dry out before you change them. The leaves can be put into a jar of water to keep them fresh for as long as possible. Make sure the jar has a lid or covering with holes in it to stop the young stick insects from falling in and drowning. \*Offering two or three species of food plant when you first get your stick insects is a good way finding one that they like.

**Water:** Mist-spray the leaves around your insect once a day – it will drink the droplets.

**Enclosure:** The enclosure needs to be large enough to allow your stick insect to shed its exoskeleton properly. For this species, an enclosure that is at least 90cm tall is needed for the adult insect. A number of individuals can be housed together as long as each insect has sufficient space to hang and feed without disturbing others. An enclosure should be higher than it is wide, as stick insects like to climb upwards. Place the enclosure in a spot where it gets a bit of daylight each day, but be careful it doesn't over heat in direct sunlight. Make sure there is plenty of ventilation in your enclosure.

**Temperature:** This species will do best at 22 – 26° C, but will tolerate 15 – 20° C and have a slower growth rate.

**Life span:** Around 1-2 years.

**Handling:** They should be picked up gently, by coaxing them onto your hand. As sub-adults and adults, they are often reluctant to be handled, and may try to avoid contact with human skin. However, they will settle eventually. They always prefer to climb up, so use this to your advantage when picking them up and putting them back onto the leaves. They do have hooks on their feet that they use to hang on with – these may grip your hand a little.

**Reproduction:** Adult males will mate with adult females all year round. Adult females will lay parthenogenic eggs if not mated. Once the female starts to lay eggs, they can be collected from the bottom of the enclosure and stored in a small container. From 3 onwards, the eggs may start hatching. Incubation times will be shorter at warmer temperatures and are best incubated at 23-26 degrees. The hatchlings need to be fed on soft young leaves and can be housed in the same enclosure as the adults or housed separately.

**Common issues:** Due to their length, these insects require significant space to moult, particularly in the latter instars. On occasions in captivity, these insects will attempt to moult from branches too close to the ground, which may cause significant issues. If you suspect your insect is approaching a moult, ensure it is perched high up in the enclosure with adequate clear space below it to hang and moult.

**NOTE:** These animals are captive bred and should not be released into the wild.

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