

Care guide

Spiny Leaf Insect, *Extatosoma tiaratum*



Spiny Leaf Insects are stick insects – also known as phasmids. Adult Spiny Leaf Insects are more like dead leaves than sticks however, and are very hard to spot in the wild as they hang motionless from foliage. They are leaf-eaters like other phasmids, and are found in the north east of Australia, where they feed on a variety of plants types.

They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, beginning with the eggs being tossed individually by females from the trees down to the forest floor. The eggs look very much like plant seeds and are often collected by ants and stored below ground in their nests which protects the egg from predators.

After hatching, the baby leaf insects (nymphs) must make their way to the surface and into a tree. Nymphs mimic the appearance of an ant at this stage of its life – this doesn't fool ants, but does fool other animals such as birds which don't like eating ants.

Once in a tree it begins to feed on leaves and grows by shedding its outer skeleton (exoskeleton). This process is called ecdysis or moulting. Males will do this five times, and females six times to reach maturity. To moult successfully the insect needs to hang uninterrupted beneath a leaf or branch. This can take 10mins to half an hour. Mature males develop wings and hold their abdomens straight. Females retain the curled up posture and have spines along their backs.

An amazing fact about many phasmids (including Spiny Leaf Insects) 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: Fresh healthy gum leaves – ensure fresh leaves are always available for 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. Place a few different types of gum leaves in the enclosure to give your insects a choice. Spiny leaf insects may also feed on Rose leaves, some Wattle leaves, Tree Lucerne Cadagi and Guava.

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. An enclosure should be higher than it is wide, as stick insects like to climb upwards. Minimum size requirements are 35cm high x 30cm wide x 30cm deep. 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.

Life span: Around a year.

This species will do best at 22 – 26° C, but will tolerate 10 – 20° C and have a slower growth rate.

Handling: They should be picked up gently, by coaxing them onto your hand. 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 small hooks on their feet that they use to hang on with – these may tickle a little.

Reproduction: Adult males will mate with adult females all year round. Females may also lay eggs even when she hasn't been 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 -9 months, the eggs will start hatching. They will hatch faster at 22- 25 degrees. The hatchlings should be fed on soft young leaves, and can be housed in the same enclosure as the adults.

Common issues: Sometimes stick insects will not shed their exoskeleton properly. This may be because there isn't enough room in the enclosure for them to do so, or that their environment is too dry and their new exoskeleton hardens before they can free themselves from the old one. They can also lose limbs through the moulting process if they aren't hanging correctly whilst moulting. They can regrow lost limbs at their next moult, but need at least two moults to regrow a limb to a usable size. If you find your Spiny Leaf insect isn't eating, try offering another type, or a few different types of gum leaves to try to find a leaf that it likes to eat.

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

For more information contact Minibeast Wildlife at info@minibeastwildlife.com.au