



*Ashley Gade

Feeder Cockroach Species (Order Blattodea, Family Blaberidae)

Introduction

Cockroaches, or often simply known as “roaches”, belong to a very large and diverse group of cosmopolitan insects in the order Blattodea consisting of over 4,600 species. They are also a relatively primitive and ancient group of insects as well, with evidence of them dating as far back as the Carboniferous period at least 320 million years ago. Most cockroaches are generalists in terms of their evolution, life cycles, and other natural history, with few to no specialized adaptations, typically. As previously mentioned, cockroaches can be found throughout most areas of the world, depending on species, and can occupy a wide variety of temperate to tropical habitats including underneath, or among leaf litter and debris, living or other dead plant matter/vegetation, bark and rotting wood, caves, and human habitations.

Although most people regard cockroaches as household pests, and associate them with filth, the spread of disease or pathogens, and other unsanitary conditions, relatively few of the 4,600 species are frequently associated with humans, with only around 30 species being associated with humans, and 4 being well known as pests. However, when it comes to the captive care and keeping of roaches, either as pets or as feeders for other animals, most species that are now utilized are tropical to sub-tropical species that are not associated with humans, have relatively narrow care requirements, and generally are not conducive to becoming pests should they escape. Many species also very seldom, or do not climb or fly as well. Commonly utilized feeder roach species include, but are certainly not limited to the: Turkish or rusty red roach (*Blatta lateralis*) or “red runners”, Guyana spotted roaches, or commonly known as Dubias (*Blaptica dubia*), discoid roaches (*Blaberus spp.*), pallid and red headed roaches (*Phoetalis spp.*) and (*Oxyhaloua spp.*), green banana roaches (*Panchlora nivea*), and the Madagascar hissing cockroach, or hissers (*Gromphadorhina portentosa*). Feeder roaches have, overall, rapidly become an alternative to feeder house crickets in ease of care and breeding, greater nutritional value, and tendency to produce less noise and odor.

Taxonomy:

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Arthropoda

Class: Insecta

Order: Blattodea

Family: Blaberidae

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

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Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Moderate/Intermediate.

Legal and Regulatory Status (*Subject to Change)

Consult your nearest United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) branch for any further, current federal regulatory or legal status. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Size

Cockroaches can vary considerable in size depending on their life stages and species. The following are typical adult sizes of commonly kept feeder roach species:

- Turkesta, Red Runner, or Rusty Red Cockroach (*B. lateralis*): 1/8th to 2.2 inches.
- Guyana Spotted Cockroach or Dubias (*B. dubia*): 1 ½ to 2 inches.
- Discoid Cockroaches (*Blaberus spp.*): 1 ½ to 3 inches.
- Green Banana Cockroaches (*P. nivea*): ½ to 1 inch.
- Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches (*G. portentosa*): 1 ½ to 3 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing, or enclosures for most species of feeder roaches can be relatively simple and inexpensive to purchase and maintain. Many commercially available tubs (including those made by Rubbermaid, Sterilite, and Iris), aquariums/terrariums, Kritter Keepers, or other containers of sufficient height as to prevent escape often work well. The container or enclosure should be large enough for each roach housed within it to be accommodated and not be in constant contact with any wastes inside the container. For climbing and flying species, or those that can have a greater tendency to escape, a layer of Vaseline, plastic boxing tape, or other slippery surface can be used around the top 2 to 3 inches to one third of the container. A tight, securely fitting lid or top with adequate ventilation can also be used as well. If using a plastic container, the lid that comes with the container can be used and modified by punching or carving out a section and covering it with a secure wire mesh. Cleaning wise, containers should be spot cleaned and cleaned regularly every 1 to 2 weeks to remove any soiled food, debris, and frass (shed exoskeletons).

Many different substrates can be used to house feeder roaches, but any substrate that is chosen should obviously be chemical and pesticide free. Aspen shavings, Sani chips, coconut fibers, sphagnum moss and cypress mulch (for species requiring higher humidity), bark, paper towel, newspaper are some substrates that can be used. Some species may require 2-3 inches of substrate. Conversely, many people find that maintaining them simply on a bare (or no substrate) also often works well. In addition, suitable hides, shelters, and other furnishings that can be provided can include egg crates/cartons, cork bark, rock slabs, and other similar materials.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

As most species of feeder roaches are tropical to sub-tropical, heating and humidity should be considered for each species being maintained. Generally, most species can be maintained anywhere from 75 to 95 degrees F., and 50 to 80% humidity. If additional heating is needed, a low wattage ceramic heat emitter, incandescent bulb, or UTH (or under tank heating pad) can be used. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of any feeder species can be given as well. If an UTH is used, create at least a ¼ inch gap to create adequate airflow. Also be sure to use a quality dimmer or thermostat as well. Some species, such as *P. nivea* will require higher temperatures and humidity than others. Additional lighting typically is not required for most feeder roach

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species.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Most species of cockroaches are detritivorous to omnivorous, with a few species being frugivorous (feeding on fruits and vegetables). Feeding and diet for most feeder roach species is also relatively simple with a few considerations to keep in mind. As they are intended as feeders, any diet that is provided should be a quality one, and should include gutloading (which entails providing them a quality, nutritionally sound diet which can be derived by the animals that consume them). A wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as grain based diets can be provided to most feeder roach species, including, but not limited to apples, pears, oranges, carrots, bananas, broccoli, potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables. Food matter that becomes moldy, soiled, or otherwise uneaten should be cleaned and removed regularly. High protein foods such as dog and cat foods, and many types of meats should be avoided.

For water and hydration, water crystals are perhaps the best source for their hydration. Water crystals are commercially available at many reptile shows and expos, suppliers, and reptile/exotic pet specialty stores, and that consist of a synthetic, gel-like material that absorbs water. An actual water container or deli-cup can also be used, but should be low and shallow enough to prevent them from drowning, but easily accessible. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Most roaches and other feeder insects can easily be handled, moved, or transferred from one container or enclosure to another if needed by gently shaking or tapping the egg carton, tube, or other hide that they are on or within. It is recommended that they be dusted or supplemented with calcium and other vitamins prior to feeding to other animals as well. Individuals can also be gently grasped and offered using forceps or tweezers as well.

It is possible for some people to develop allergies to feeder insects and/or their frass (droppings and waste products) as a result of too frequent of handling or constant exposure to thereof. Handling your feeder insects in a well ventilated room or other area, and using gloves are some ways to prevent any potential human health related issues. Also remember to be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

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