



# PINT-SIZED PETS

## Smaller Pets Have Big Potential

by Randy Kambic



Whether they crawl, swim, hop or fly, speak, make other sounds or stay silent, many small wonders can make ideal pets.

While 85 percent of U.S. households with pets feature a dog or a cat, giving a home to smaller friendly creatures can mean less maintenance and less cost—including only tiny stomachs to fill and no vaccinations. Downsizing to well-considered domesticated companions also provides uncommon windows to animal behavior for adults and youngsters alike.

Apparently, many appreciate these benefits. The same 2011 American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey that reported on dogs and cats also showed that 12.6 million residences have fish; 5.7 million, birds; 5 million, small animals (rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets, gerbils, hamsters, mice and rats); and 4.6 million, reptiles.

"These animals pose a world of possibilities," says Veterinary Doctor Kimberly Weiss, owner of Heartland Healing Hands, in Oklahoma City.

"They all have individual needs. Having them around starts as something cool, a special cachet for a youngster, and then, if fostered by parents, into a special sense of responsibility."

### Fish

Watching colorful fish swim around an aquarium encourages a serene, soothing feeling. In addition to their traditional purview in kids' bedrooms and seafood restaurants, more workplaces and physicians' offices sport tanks these days.

Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Melinda Fernyhough, Ph.D., a manager with the Hartz Mountain Corporation, recommends that a first collection encompass a variety of species that happily coexist, behave differently, and don't lead to overcrowding. "It is best to err on the side of fewer fish; you can always add more," she says. "A good



initial combination can be darting petras, slower moving mollies and guppies, interactive oscars, and plecostomus bottom feeders."

### Birds

For first-time bird guardians, "Consider starting off with a small bird, such as a parakeet, cockatiel or canary," says Dr. John Simon, a veterinarian and owner of Woodside Animal Clinic, in Royal Oak, Michigan. "If you are more adventurous, consider what you desire most in a bird—how much talking you expect, its appearance, level of friendliness—and how much it will grow. Some larger breeds, such as Amazon parrots, macaws and cockatoos, can live 60 or 70 years, so your selection could remain in your family for generations. If you're away a lot, consider housing two of the same breed; they can keep each other company."

There's no magic to producing a talker. "The more interaction, attention and mental stimulation, the happier the bird and greater inclination to talk," advises Weiss. She suggests taking a bird out of its cage regularly and providing lead- and zinc-free mirrors, noisemakers and other toys to ward off boredom. Favorite gabbers include African greys, macaws and double-yellow-headed Amazons; cockatoos are more prone to imitate sounds.

### Small Animals

While many rabbits do not like to be held and cuddled and hamsters can sometimes nip if awakened or startled, guinea pigs are typically friendly and often enjoy interaction with people. They can emit a charming chirp or "oink" sound when petted or touched.

Smaller rodents like gerbils, mice and rats love scurrying around their cages and "jogging" in wheels. Hamsters and rats are sometimes active at night, so their cages might not be suitable in bedrooms. Guinea pigs are more docile and sleep much more.

"These 'pocket pets' like fresh veggies to supplement their nutrition—green beans, zucchini, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, peas, spinach, arugula and green peppers," advises Seattle-based Veterinarian Darla Rewers, owner of Ancient Arts Holistic Services. "Rab-

bits should get more of the lettuce-type greens, but limit the spinach, because it is high in calcium.”

## Reptiles

Whether it's the dinosaur-like appearance of an iguana, flicking tongue of a chameleon, intricate scale patterns of a snake or wise-looking turtle head, the exotic appearance of reptiles fascinates children. They take up little space inside a small aquarium and their lack of fur prevents potential allergic reactions. However, some reptiles need special lighting and specific amounts of water; maintaining proper levels of heat and humidity is vital to some of them in order to replicate their natural environment.

It's best to learn as much as you can

about a potential pet before bringing it home. Understanding species temperament, behavior patterns, maintenance needs, diet and average lifespan helps you know what to expect beforehand and ultimately to better enjoy your choice of the small-pet experience.

*Find tips on small animal ownership and care at [Hartz.com](http://Hartz.com) and [AmericanPetProducts.org](http://AmericanPetProducts.org).*

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