

FAQs about Payton's exotic pet collection

1.) So what exactly do you have?

As of June 2010 I've got about 60 tarantulas, three emperor scorpions, a boa constrictor, and four ball pythons.

2.) Okay, so are you going to get more?

Not really. I'm letting the tarantula collection gradually dwindle by giving away some of the spiderlings (spider babies) and when spiders die I generally don't replace them. After the scorpions die in a year or two I won't get any more of those. But I do plan to get another female pinstripe ball python and breed my ball pythons over the next few years. But if I get babies I will likely sell them all. I don't have space for a lot of snakes.

3.) Why oh why?

I find these animals very beautiful from a visual standpoint. The colors, patterns, and shapes are elegant and subtle and complex in a way that only organic things can be. I'm also fascinated by their physiology. The fact that some of my spiders lay egg sacs with over 2,000 spiderlings, or that their legs work on a hydraulic system, and on and on, these creatures are simply amazing. It's pure science fiction, except it isn't fiction. It's real.

4.) How long have you been doing this?

Since 2003.

5.) What does your wife think?

She prefers my other hobby (triathlon). (She likes it when I'm in shape . . .) But generally she's okay with it. As long as I don't ask her to take care of them.

6.) Aren't tarantulas poisonous?

Tarantulas are venomous, not poisonous. A venom is a toxin that one animal injects into another. Poison is something that is eaten or inhaled. All tarantulas have venom because they need it to subdue their prey, but the venom ranges from quite mild (like a bad mosquito bite) to quite strong (several days of intense muscle cramps, heart palpitations, and vomiting). The latter animals are commonly referred to as possessing "medically significant" venom or simply "hot" venom. Most of my collection is not medically significant, but I do have a few with hot venom.

7.) Isn't it stupid to keep tarantulas with hot venom in a house with little children?

Not any more than the legions of deadly chemicals that most people keep under their kitchen sink. Or sharp knives, or lithium batteries, or electric sockets, or busy streets, or fast food, or TV and video games, etc, etc, etc. A child can die quickly or slowly by any number of means. My spiders are locked away in a room downstairs and the girls can't get into that room. Those spiders never leave their cages, even for cleaning.

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8.) But boa constrictors and pythons get huge, right? And they could eat your children, right?

Depends on the species. Some boa constrictors and pythons do indeed get quite large. A reticulated python for example can get up to 25 feet in length and could easily eat a small child or a full-grown man for that matter. But I keep ball pythons and a red-tail boa. The scientific name for ball python (also known as royal pythons in Europe) is *Python regius*. These gentle, secretive animals only get to 4.5 feet and about 3,000 grams. It is physiologically impossible for them to eat a human of any size or constrict them. The scientific name for my boa is *Boa constrictor imperator*. The males, which is what I have, only get up to about 5.5 feet. It's also impossible for him to eat a human of any size. I suppose he could constrict a baby to death, but that would entail the baby somehow crawling into the basement, unlocking the exotic pet room, undoing the clasps on his cage, and then crawling into his cage and then working hard to piss him off enough to do that. I think that's highly unlikely . . .

9.) How many people die a year from tarantula bites?

None. No one in recorded history has ever died from a tarantula bite.

10.) What about from a ball python or boa?

No one has ever died from a ball python. Every few years a boa constrictor will kill someone, but these are always adult female Suriname boas (*Boa constrictor constrictor*), which can have a nasty temperment and get up to 15+ feet. And this always happens to someone who is handling them alone (never do that with a boid larger than eight feet) or is drunk or being stupid.

11.) How long do they live?

Depends on the species and sex. Some of my North American desert species female tarantulas can live up to 40 years. The males around 15 years. But then some of my female tarantulas only live eight or nine years, the males only three or four. The pythons and boa can easily live 25 to 35 years.

12.) What do they eat?

The tarantulas and scorpions eat crickets or other small bugs. The snakes eat rats or mice, typically "F/T," which means "frozen/thawed." Sometimes I feed them live mice or rats if they won't take the thawed ones.

13.) So do you have frozen mice and rats in your freezer?

Yes.

14.) Isn't that gross?

Not as gross as frozen slabs of raw cow meat in my opinion.

15.) Isn't it cruel to feed live mice and rats to snakes?

No. Snakes have to eat and that's what they eat. And besides, their strike is so fast and powerful that I doubt the rodents feel much. And it certainly isn't as cruel as the government-subsidized beef, poultry, and pork industries, which keep those animals in the most horribly painful and filthy conditions you could imagine.

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16.) How often do you feed them?

Adult tarantulas only once a month or less. (If I remember.) Spiderlings about once a week. Snakes about every 10 days.

17.) How often do you clean their cages?

There's a little maintenance I do almost every day for about 10 minutes or so, but a full cleaning for tarantula cages only once every few years. The snake enclosures get a full cleaning every few weeks.

18.) Have you bred your snakes or spiders?

I've tried breeding several species of tarantulas but only one breeding worked out. All the other times the females ate the males or the breeding just didn't take or the females molted (shed their skin) before they laid their egg sac. (When they shed their outer skin they also shed their inner spermatheca, which holds the sperm they store from the mating.) I will attempt to breed the ball pythons over the next few years. Ball python genetics are fascinating and complex, too much to go into here, but in short you can combine dominant, co-dominant, or recessive genes to create all kinds of beautiful creatures.

19.) If your breeding is successful will you make money on the babies?

No. By the time you add in food, housing, heating elements, the cost for the parents, the cost to get a booth at a reptile expo to sell them, gas money to get there, parking, etc, etc, I'd be lucky if I broke even.

20.) How much do these animals cost?

Again, depends on the species. Common tarantulas or species that produce huge egg sacs go for about \$20 for adults on internet forums. Species that produce smaller egg sacs or are harder to maintain can go for as much as \$500 for adults. My most expensive one is about \$100. Females cost more because they live longer.

For ball pythons your basic morphs like spiders, pastels, pinstripes, etc, average about \$200. But I've seen some morphs with complex or difficult-to-produce genes for as much as \$25,000. My boa was \$80.

21.) Where do you get these?

The internet of course! And then the mail! Oh yes, every day there are thousands of exotic pets flying around the country via USPS or Fed Ex or UPS.

22.) Is it true that you're an editor for the Forum of the American Tarantula Society and you have written several articles for that magazine as well as the Journal of the British Tarantula Society?

Yes.

23.) How do you balance all these things in your life?

I don't watch TV and I don't sleep as much as I should.