



**P & K Pets  
Info Sheet #11**

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# STICK/LEAF INSECTS

## CARE



INFORMATION



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ABN: 54 461 065 535

### INTRODUCTION

Phasmids are insects that eat leaves and resemble leaves or sticks. They are usually green or brown but may reveal brightly coloured underwings when they fly. They have developed many unusual shapes to camouflage themselves to avoid detection by predators. The order Phasmatodea contains the largest insects in Australia including the Great Brown Stick Insect which measures up to 30cm in length.



The leaf like appearance of leaf insects makes them very difficult to detect. They are not very active during the day but move about to feed on foliage at night. These insects appear awkward and slow when they move and often rest with one leg extended and gently sway on the branches. This gives them the appearance of a dried twig or leaf swaying in the breeze. They depend on their resemblance to leaves and twigs to protect them from predators.

All phasmids are plant-eaters. Leaf insects should not be confused with mantids, although they have a similar appearance. Mantids such as the Preying Mantis are insect eaters and on close inspection, mantids have forelegs modified for grasping and holding prey.

One interesting Australian phasmid is the Spiny Leaf Insect (*Extatosoma tiaratum*), also called Macleay's Spectre Stick Insect. The females of this species have very large bodies but very short wings and are unable to fly. The males are long and slim with fully developed wings. Spiny Leaf Insects are popular pets in Australia and also overseas.



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### **HOUSING**

In general, the more common species of Stick-Insect can be kept together. If you are breeding more difficult species then it pays to use separate cages to create individual requirements. Any basic enclosure or vivarium can be suitable. Stick insects are long thin animals, which hang down from their food plants to shed their skins. It is therefore most important that the cage has sufficient depth, as a general rule it should be three times as high as the adult length of the stick insects to be kept in it. It is also useful to have it so designed that you can easily replace the food plant material whenever it is required.

Most stick insects come from tropical or semi tropical environments and are happiest between 23°C and 26°C, though the common Indian stick insect (*Carausius morosus*) and some of its relatives are happy at normal home temperatures of between 15°C and 23°C. Heating, if required, can be achieved with a heat lamp and bulb. It is important to make sure the stick insects cannot reach the light bulb, as they will burn themselves on it. A red bulb should be used during the hours of darkness, or a ceramic element can be used 24 hours a day.

Not all sticks share a common need for humidity, some species such as *Carausius Morosus* will be happy to live in a fairly open cage, whereas others such as *Epidares Nolimetangere* will require an almost totally enclosed cage with around 80% relative humidity. Regardless of this all Sticks need water and it is a good policy to thoroughly mist the inside of the cage including all the food plant material each evening or daily. Some stick insects such as *Haaniella* sp need open water in a low bowl to drink, don't be too concerned if they leave their heads under water remember that insect breath through their thoracic and abdominal spiracles not through their mouths like us. Note also that in some places tap water can harm some species, so it doesn't hurt to use either rain water or to let the tap water stand for a day or two.



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### **FEEDING**

Different species have different requirements, but almost all stick insects will eat bramble (*Rubus* sp.). If you are unsure what stick insects you have then a selection is preferable, followed by observation to determine it's preferred food. You can feed them on oak, bramble, sweet chesnut, rhododendron, eucalyptus, apple, raspberry or rose leaves. The Spiny Leaf Insect will eat mainly eucalyptus, oak or bramble. Cut the leaves with a small section of the branch from the tree and place in water (like flowers). Change the leaves every few days, it is often wise to take from sites not too close to major road ways to avoid the poisoning effects of various pollutants, if this is unavoidable then the plant material should be washed before being offered to the insects.

### **HANDLING**

Great care should be taken in handling stick insects, remember they are living creatures just like you. Some species such as the spiny leaf insect are relatively sturdy, while species such as Pink Wings (*Sipyloidea sipyilus*) tend to lose their legs very easily. Also it should be noted that spiny leaf insects can and will pinch (with their thorny limbs) and bite if not used to being handled, other species such as the American Walking Stick (*Anisomorpha bupestroides*) and to a lesser extent Pink Wings have a defensive chemical spray which can cause temporary blindness and considerable pain to an adult.





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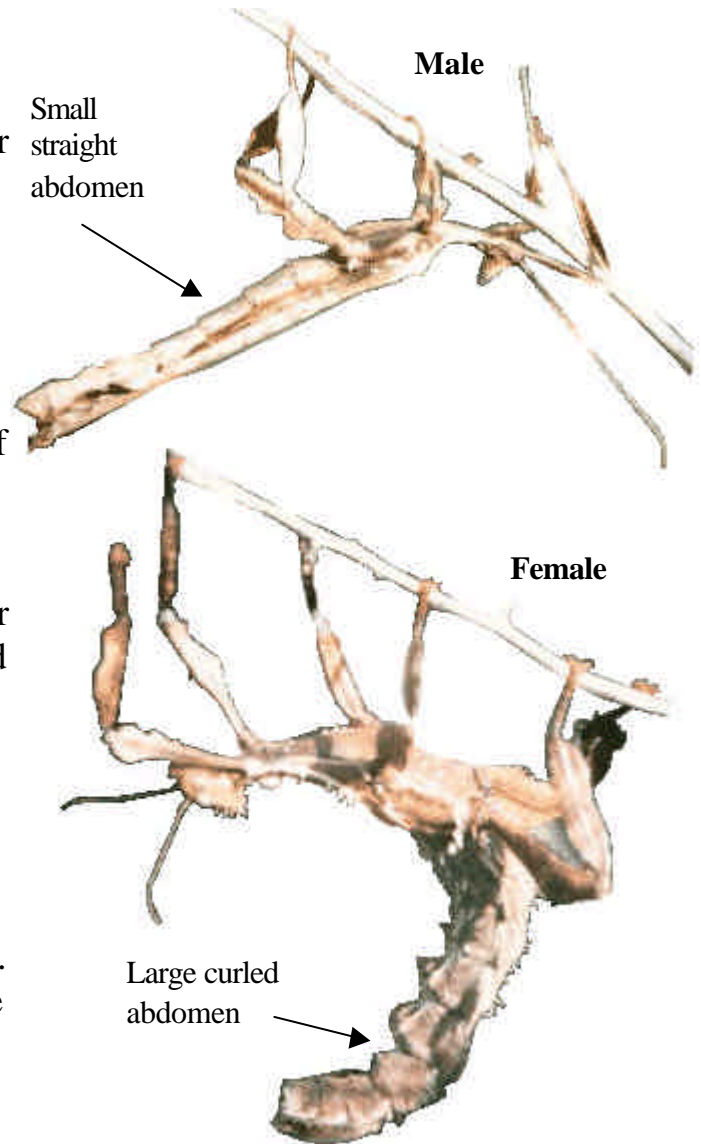
### BREEDING

Female Spiny Leaf Insects are not only larger than the males, but also live longer. They lay thousands of eggs during their adult life, flicking them onto the ground below their perch. The eggs have a knob, called a capitulum, which is attractive to ants. Ants carry the eggs back to their underground nests, eat only the knob, and leave the rest of the egg in the nest, protected from other animals that might eat it.

The young phasmids (or nymphs) hatch after one to three years underground and look and behave like red headed black ants. They emerge from the ant nest and climb rapidly upwards, looking for soft green leaves. In a tree, they moult into a green or brown, slow-moving leaf mimic. The females live for about 18 months, while the males are only short-lived, surviving for around 6-8 months. Amazingly, the female does not need to mate to produce fertile eggs, however, without mating all her eggs will hatch as females.

### GENERAL

Some stick insects can fly while others cannot. The spiny leaf insect female can't fly, while the male can with a small set of wings. The spiny leaf insect is the most common stick insect for keeping as a pet. They are easy to maintain and look after, and cost little, as their food is available from your local park. Always make sure you are aware of their relatively short life span. When you purchase a spiny leaf insect as a pet, its most likely already a few months old. A male would not make as good a pet as the female because of this.



**Have fun with your new pet!**