

Solving problems with iguanas

Learning to live with large lizards*

The green iguana reaches up to 6.5 feet in length from head to tail with spikes traveling down the neck, back and tail, and a dewlap (throat fan) helping to regulate body temperature, warn predators and attract a mate. Despite their name, these large reptiles can be other colors, including brown, black or a mix of shades.

Green iguanas live and loaf in a variety of habitats, from urban to rural and on the ground to up in a tree. They're excellent swimmers and can tolerate salt or freshwater. They're mostly herbivorous but will eat the occasional insect, dead animal, tree snail, etc. Like all reptiles, iguanas get their thermal energy from external sources of heat such as the sun. When the temperature drops below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, iguanas can lose the ability to grip, climb and move, and they may fall from heights.

Iguanas in the neighborhood

Simply seeing an iguana is no cause for concern. Iguanas, though not native to the U.S., have become well established in places such as Florida. Some rafted in from their native home ranges in the wake of hurricanes and other natural events; some were pets released into backyards and natural areas.

In the 1980s, the green iguana was top of the charts for the pet reptile trade. Then, predictably and inevitably, pet owners began releasing iguanas into the wild when they got too large, too aggressive or too sick. These former pets, along with escapees and refugees from exotic animal shipments, expanded their hold on areas around southern Florida's bays, canals, ponds, impoundments and drainage ditches. (Never release a pet iguana into the wild. Check with your state wildlife agency to find out about exotic pet amnesty programs.)

Iguanas in and around the home

Keeping your yard maintained and clear of brush, thickets and rock piles can deter iguanas from finding shelter there. To prevent digging, construct an L-shaped barrier consisting of 16-gauge galvanized wire buried vertically 4 to 6 inches with the bottom of the "L" extending horizontally approximately 10 inches. Trim branches that are near or overhanging the roofline. Remove fruit that has fallen from trees or other plants, and never leave pet food unattended outdoors as it can attract iguanas and other wild animal visitors.



To evict an iguana in an interstitial space such as an attic, leave all the lights on and place a blaring radio (tuned to a rock or rap station) and vinegar-doused rags or tennis balls around the space. Be patient—it may take a few days. It may also help to use a one-way door approximately 6-by-6-by-12 inches (available at Tomahawk Live Trap). Once the iguanas are gone, promptly seal any entry hole so the situation doesn't happen again.

Iguanas and pets

Threatened iguanas will whip their tails in defense, which can seriously injure a dog or cat, so always keep your cats indoors and dogs on a 6-foot or shorter leash. Minimizing attractants (e.g., shelter, water, food, etc.) will go a long way toward preventing conflicts between pets and iguanas.

Iguanas in the garden

Tolerance, planting in abundance and selecting iguana-resistant plants for the garden can go a long way toward preventing conflicts with the lizards. Iguanas are drawn to bright-colored flowers and plants with tender leaves (orchids, roses, hibiscus, etc.). They don't like to eat plants with tough, waxy or thick leaves (citrus, milkweed, pentas, crotons, etc.). Protect valuable plants with wire cages, and wrap trees and palms with smooth sheet metal guards placed 18 inches above the ground to keep iguanas from climbing.

Motion-activated water sprinklers can deter iguanas, as can wind chimes and reflective CDs hung on shrubs and trees. Use a variety of physical, sound and visual deterrents and periodically rotate them to keep iguanas from becoming accustomed to any single deterrent.

Iguanas and impoundments

To protect homes, seawalls and water impoundments, use a comprehensive approach that includes a mix of exclusion materials, electric fencing, repellents, habitat modification and harassment strategies (such as making loud noises or spraying water from a hose) where appropriate to keep iguanas out of areas where they're unwanted. It's also possible to create nearby artificial nesting habitats of sand (preferred) or mulch in which the iguanas can dig and lay eggs (see Krysko et al., "Distribution, Natural History, and Impacts of the Introduced Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) in Florida," *Iguana* 14, no. 3 (Sept. 2007): <https://journals.ku.edu/iguana/issue/view/1977>). Eggs can then be collected and destroyed through compression or cooling. Dispose of destroyed eggs in a plastic bag and report active nests to your state wildlife agency.

Why killing iguanas is not the answer

Killing iguanas doesn't solve conflicts with them, nor does it reduce their population since iguanas have high reproductive output and few predators. The best way to solve conflicts with iguanas is to prevent them in the first place by removing attractants (mainly food and shelter).

If lethal control is required, the method of killing should be the most humane, follow American Veterinary Medical Association standards, and be part of a comprehensive plan to address the source of conflicts.

