



Poison Dart Frogs

Dendrobates, Phyllobates & Ranitomeya spp.

INTERMEDIATE · 2–2.5 IN ADULT · 10–20 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · SOUTH AMERICA

Living jewels that keep banker's hours. Poison dart frogs are tiny, boldly painted rainforest frogs that hunt all day in plain view. They're the rare terrarium animal that's always on display. Two honest headlines: captive-bred frogs carry no wild toxins, and the frogs are the easy part. The vivarium is the real project; you're growing a small piece of rainforest that happens to have frogs in it.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Adult size	2–2.5 in
Lifespan	10–20 years
Day / night temps	72–78 °F / 65–72 °F
Warm spot	78–82 °F
Humidity	80–100%
UVB	Low output, beneficial
Feeding	Fruit flies & springtails, daily
Representative	Dyeing dart frog (<i>D. tinctorius</i>)



A dart frog in the classic green-and-black suit. Dozens of species and locale forms cross NARBC breeder tables.

Photo: Yves Bas / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

About That Poison

First, the question everyone asks: captive-bred dart frogs aren't poisonous. Wild frogs build their alkaloid defenses from wild prey; on a diet of fruit flies, those toxins never develop. That doesn't make them hand pets. Amphibian skin absorbs whatever it touches, so handle only when you must (moving or health checks) with wet, clean, unscented hands, and never let soaps or sprays near the enclosure. What they lack in holdability they repay by being bold, busy and out all day.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Floor space beats height: dart frogs live on the ground and low perches, so prioritize footprint over towering tanks. Froglets start in small boxes where slow-moving fruit flies stay findable, and grow through a 12×12×12 stage into the 18×18×18 planted vivarium, the hobby's standard adult home. Same-species groups of two to four work; mixed-species or mixed-locale tanks are how you get hybrids and quietly bullied frogs, so don't. Skip racks, since these are display animals that live in light.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Froglet	6×6×6	8×8×8	Very small at morph-out; fruit flies only at first.
Juvenile	12×12×12	18×18×18	Fruit flies and springtails are the primary food.
Subadult	18×18×18	18×18×18	Bioactive planted terrarium is the hobby standard.
Adult	18×18×18	18×18×24	Same-species groups of 2–4 work; never mix species or locales.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance (benchmark: *Dendrobates tinctorius*, the dyeing dart frog). Enclosure dimensions in inches.

03

Cool Frogs, Bright Tanks

The plot twist: your enemy is heat, not cold. Dart frogs want 72–78 °F days, a night drop to 65–72 °F, and no warm spot past 78–82 °F. Most living rooms deliver that free, and a heat lamp mostly just cooks a rainforest. Past the low 80s these frogs stress fast; a summer heat wave is the real emergency to plan for. Spend instead on light: a bright plant light powers the vivarium and gives day-active frogs a proper day. Low-output UVB is a bonus, but only over mesh; glass blocks it completely.

04

Wet Air, Safe Water

Run humidity at 80–100% with a mostly-closed glass top and regular misting, and leave a little ventilation so wet air stays fresh instead of stagnant. Now the strict part: a dart frog drinks and breathes through its skin, so **every drop of water that enters the tank must be dechlorinated**. Chlorine and chloramine in tap water burn amphibian skin. Pools get conditioned tap; the mister gets RO or distilled. Dart frogs are clumsy swimmers, so keep standing water shallow.

05

Build the Rainforest

Bioactive isn't optional. It's the life-support system. Build in layers: drainage at the bottom, a tropical soil mix that never fully dries, and a deep blanket of leaf litter, where the frogs actually live. Plant it with tropicals (bromeliads, pothos, ferns) over cork bark and wood for climbing and cover. Seed the soil with springtails and tropical isopods: a cleanup crew that eats waste and mold and doubles as a self-restocking snack bar. A finished vivarium runs itself; you mostly garden.

06

The Fruit Fly Economy

Dart frogs eat small and often: flightless fruit flies daily, with springtails joining as the second staple from the juvenile stage on. The flies are empty calories, so the dust does the work: plain calcium, D3-free and phosphorus-free, at most feedings, and a calcium with D3 once or twice a week in place of that plain powder, plus a D3-free multivitamin twice a month for vitamin A. Keep fresh cultures in rotation so a crash never leaves the tank hungry. A healthy dart frog looks a touch plump.

07

Health Red Flags

Dart frogs are out all day, so illness shows early if you know the baseline. Take seriously: a bold frog that hides, a bony silhouette, repeated strike-and-miss hunting (classic vitamin A deficiency), constant soaking, dull or darkening skin, or trembling and poor coordination. Small frogs crash fast; none of these are wait-and-see. Find an amphibian-savvy exotics vet before you need one, and go at the first sustained sign.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual - when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.