



Marbled Salamanders

Ambystoma opacum

INTERMEDIATE • 3.5–5 IN ADULT • 8–10 YR LIFESPAN • FOSSORIAL • EASTERN US

A small mole salamander that spends most of its life underground, which is the first honest thing to say about keeping one. Marbled salamanders are banded white on black, secretive, and built for cool damp soil, not a warm living room. This is an animal you watch, not one you hold. They're also a native eastern US species, so the law is part of the hobby here: check your state's collection rules and buy captive-bred.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Ambient temp	55–68 °F
Night temp	50–60 °F
Humidity	60–80%
UVB	Not required
Diet	Worms, crickets, slugs
Feeding	Every 2–3 days
Adult size	3.5–5 inches
Lifespan	8–10 years



Pale bands on black are standard for the species. Marbled salamanders occupy a smaller, quieter corner of the amphibian tables at NARBC.
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01

Watch, Don't Handle

Marbled salamanders are secretive by design. Most days you'll see a closed burrow and a shifted leaf, not the animal; that's normal, and it's the deal you accept. Handle only when you have to, with hands rinsed clean and wet with dechlorinated water, because amphibian skin absorbs whatever it touches. Keep soap, lotion and cleaners away from the enclosure. Nothing about this animal rewards handling; happily, nothing about it requires much.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Footprint first, height second. Every stage in the table wants a horizontal enclosure with floor space for a burrow, and none of them belong in a rack. Adults start at 24×18×12 and do better at 36×18×12. Fill it with as much deep, moist substrate as the enclosure allows: a fossorial animal with nowhere to dig is a stressed one. House them singly. Larvae will eat each other, and crowded adults compete for the same cool damp corner.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	10×8×8	12×8×8	Fall-breeding species; larvae overwinter in ponds before metamorphosis.
Juvenile	12×8×8	18×12×12	Cool temperatures required: 60–70 °F. Heat is the usual mistake here.
Subadult	18×12×12	24×18×12	Fossorial by now: give deep, moist substrate they can vanish into.
Adult	24×18×12	36×18×12	Only 3.5–5 in, but floor space and deep soil matter more than height.

Enclosure sizes from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Horizontal footprint beats height at every stage; none of these animals belong in a rack.

03

Cool Room, No Lamp

This section decides whether you can keep one. Marbled salamanders want 55–68 °F by day and 50–60 °F at night, cooler than most houses run in summer. **Heat is what ends most attempts with this species, not neglect: hold the room in that range and treat a hot spell as an emergency.** Sort out a basement, a cool room or a chilled cabinet before you buy the animal. No heat lamp, no heat mat, no heat rock. UVB is not required, and dim ambient light suits them fine.

04

Damp, and Dechlorinated

Hold humidity at 60–80% and keep the substrate damp all the way down, not soaking. Press a handful: it should clump and hold without dripping. Add a shallow water dish the animal can climb out of, and change it often. Every drop of water that touches this salamander (dish, misting, substrate) must be dechlorinated; chlorine and chloramine pass straight through amphibian skin and kill. Ventilate enough to keep mold off the surface, but not so much that the tank dries out.

05

Substrate and Cover

Build the floor like a forest, not a terrarium kit. A deep mix of pesticide-free topsoil and coconut fiber, damp through, topped with leaf litter and sphagnum moss, gives them somewhere to disappear and something to hunt through. Add cork bark and flat wood at ground level for daytime cover. Skip sand and gravel entirely; both are useless for burrowing and dangerous if swallowed. Springtails and isopods earn their keep, working the litter and keeping mold down.

06

Feeding After Dark

Worms, crickets and slugs, offered every 2–3 days. Earthworms cut to size are the backbone; crickets and small roaches add variety. Collect slugs only from ground you know is free of pellets and pesticide. Feed after dark, when they come up to forage: scatter prey near the burrow mouth or use soft tongs. Gut-load feeders, dust with plain D3-free calcium at most meals, and a D3 calcium twice a week instead. A salamander that stops eating is usually telling you the tank is too warm or too dry.

07

Health Red Flags

The first sign is usually position: a secretive animal sitting out in the open, day after day, has something wrong. Look for reddened skin on the belly and legs, bloating, cloudy or sloughing patches, and a thinning tail base. Check the thermometer and the water dish first: a warm or dirty setup is behind most of it. Then find a vet who sees amphibians. Red leg and other bacterial infections move fast here; waiting a week is usually a week too many.

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.