
HEALTH & DISEASES



This column is taken care of by the "Study-group for Diseases and the Optimum Keeping and Breeding of Terrarium Animals" of the Belgian Society "Terra". If there is a question concerning health or diseases, feel free to contact the President of the Study-group: Mr. Hugo Claessen, Arthur Sterckstraat 18, 2600 Berchem, Belgium. He will try to answer your question in this column to the benefit of all members.

THE TALE OF A NOVICE HERPETOLOGIST AND AN UP-TURNED FLOWERPOT.

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THE FIRST PART OF THE TITLE.

I have not been a practising snakekeeper for very long. For years I kept my interest in these animals theoretical, until the moment came when an acquaintance of mine made me realise that a theoretical interest in snakes could very easily be transformed into a practical one. A terrarium indeed appeared to be made in a jiffy and provided that nothing was noticeably over the boundaries of my study, my wife and children appeared to be very accommodating concerning the new "pet". I bought a pair of snakes called *Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis*, snakes of which neither the initial

expense, nor the care presented insuperable objections; so I became a snakekeeper. In conclusion I got this tendency, one which many a herpetologist will perhaps vainly have fought: the tendency to collect. A year after the purchase of my first snakes my hobby had extended to 8 snakes: four of the *Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis* kind, three of the *Thamnophis sirtalis similis* kind and one *Thamnophis sirtalis semifasciata*. These animals all had in common the fact that none of them had gone through any health problem, something that I as a layman would have regarded as lightly unwelcome. And with this final remark I have come to the second part of the title.

A SNAKE AND A FLOWERPOT.

Through the kind offices of Jan van het Meer, a pre-eminent authority on the *Thamnophis*, I was able to come to possess a *Thamnophis sirtalis similis*, a female animal, which, however, lacked a piece of her tail (amputated by an accident during the transport from America to The Netherlands), but was still very well able to procreate. I accepted his offer. But later on, when Jan had received the snake in order to send her to me, it turned out that there was more wrong with the snake than only that missing piece of tail. What was the problem? In the terrarium the original owner had put an upturned flowerpot as a shelter, the hole in this pot turned out to offer insufficient space for the animal and so one day she got stuck. In conclusion the snake started to wriggle in order to get out of his flowerpot almost rubbing herself in two. What I put in the quarantine terrarium on 30 January 1988 had hardly anything to do with a snake. The wound, which was at about 15 centimeters from her head, looked horrible: very deep and at least two centimeters wide, the side of her

stomach was a wretched sight, with raw areas at the rims of the wounds. The animal was completely listless, hardly flickered her tongue and needed to cast the skin, for strands of skin were all over her body, but she was not in the mood to slough. Jan van het Meer had desinfected the wound with *Gentian Violet*, a very sovereign remedy from the old days, but also a remedy that makes wounds look even worse. Finally the animal also suffered from pocks. The family, gradually interested in father's hobby, voiced collectively the feeling of horror and pity, when they saw this wretched bundle of snake in the terrarium.

THERAPY BY HERBAL MEDICINES.

How should my first patient be treated? I had no experience at all. I decided to use my intuition and the advice of my wife, whose know-how of herbal medicine is rather good and employed the following therapy.

For several weeks I made this wounded snake swim in lukewarm water for a quarter of an hour daily. At the beginning she did not put her head into it, the animal was too exhausted. Accordingly, after the bathing, I treated her with two kinds of natural medicine, namely symphosan and St. John's oil (Johannesolie). Symphosan, a slimy solvent, which is gathered from the roots of the fresh *Symphytum officinale* (blackwort), has a wide range of effects in herbal medicine. The remedy can be taken externally as well as internally. I choose this remedy, for it aids the removal of the wound fluid and pus and it stimulates the tissue to granulation (the forming of new tissue). Although I could have taken an arbitrary baby-oil instead of St. John's oil, I preferred oil with *Hypericum perforatum* in it, for there are substances in this plant which relieve the pain. Already after

one day large pieces of skin came off. Because fewer pieces of skin were hanging from the animal, she became more fit to be seen. After two days a first sloughing of the skin was completed in this way. On 7 February 1988, after the baths, I rubbed her again with St. John's oil. Two hours later she had cast her skin again. There were no more gashes to be seen and her skin was glossy, supple and beautifully vividly coloured.

Striking in these first days of treatment was that the snake went to lay down on a shelf close to the lamp in order to turn her wound as near as possible to this source of heat. For me the snake's signal was the inducement to keep the lamp burning for a longer period of time, for the first fortnight this lamp burned night and day; from which she obviously derived much benefit. For instance in this period of time the pocks wore off.

For two weeks I did not see any motions and although her situation had become less critical, she needed food urgently. But she categorically refused to accept the pieces of whiting which I offered her. Every now and then I did see her drink from the water to which I had added a few drops of Echinaforce (see later for details of this remedy). I decided to force-feed her, a nasty undertaking, for the snake resisted fiercely and me and my son could hardly manage to hold her because of her wound. Yet, one session of compulsory feeding was sufficient to make her start eating, although it was obvious that the fish had to be cut into very little pieces. During the swallowing you saw that the food had great difficulty in passing the wound and that it might be painful as well. Now the snake had regular motions and every now and then she snapped eagerly at the fish, which I offered her frequently.

In course of time, however, the wound got inflamed. The snake gave out a most unpleasant

smell. I fought this inflammation with success by trickling her with Echinaforce. Echinaforce is, in herbal medicine, a universal remedy. This solution is made of *Echinacea purpurea* which is very effective against inflammations, for it contains elements that on the one hand counteract the increase of bacteria and on the other hand stimulate the resistance of the body. So Echinaforce is the remedy when dealing with infections. Accordingly, after some time I was able to stop the treatment with Echinaforce and continue with Symphosan. I did that for another half a year, until I changed to Calendula ointment, with which I rubbed the spot, which had healed well in the meantime. *Calendula officinalis* is scientific name for the marigold. This plant contains quite a lot of effective elements and is beneficial for many internal and external problems. I choose this remedy especially because it was said to be the cure for skin problems and that the latter is true, I found through experience. The skin, however, remains sensitive and vulnerable and makes continuing care still necessary for some time to come.

By the way, a nice circumstance to close with is that because of the often rather nasty and perhaps painful treatment the snake has by no means become aggressive or shy, on the contrary: you can safely pick her up. She endured the tickling and is enduring the rubbing very meekly and is very tame. You would almost speak of affection, if she were not a snake.

CONCLUSION.

I would carefully connect a few conclusions to my experience. First that flowerpots in terraria can turn out to be very dangerous objects! Second -with due relativism- that this snake has

recovered excellently by means of herbal medicine, a therapy about which in eight years of *Litteratura Serpentium* I have not read a single word. But it turns out that even snakes can be helped by an alternative medicine-cure. Furthermore I would very much appreciate that herpetologists, who have any experience in treating wounds that I have described, would inform me of their approach.

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