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GOOTY SAPPHIRE ORNAMENTAL TARANTULA

INTRO

The arboreal ornamental tarantulas or "tiger spiders" of India and Sri Lanka are revered in the tarantula keeping hobby and no species is as strikingly colored and popular as the Sapphire Ornamental (*Poecilotheria metallica*).

Poecilotheria metallica is known from the area of Gooty in central India. Like other "ornamentals", this tarantula inhabits what forests remain in this highly populated and developed landscape and is primarily found in tree hollows.

Tarantula keepers have long fancied these tree-dwelling spiders, but many keepers have avoided the genus *Poecilotheria* because they are wary of their defensiveness, nervousness, speed and what is anecdotally considered to be significant venom. The author has kept and bred all the *Poecilotheria* tiger spiders for more than two decades and has found the gorgeous blue Gooty Sapphire Ornamental to be by far the calmest of the more than dozen species in the genus.

Ornamental tarantulas are arboreal spiders that range from 6-9" in diagonal legspan. The Gooty Sapphire Ornamental is at the smaller end of the range and adult females rarely exceed 6". (Tarantulas in the U.S. are normally measured by legspan from the tip of Leg I [first leg, not pedipalp] on one side to the tip of Leg IV [rear] on the opposite side. European hobbyists and scientists tend to measure total body length from the chelicerae [jaws] to the rear of the abdomen).

GENERAL CARE & ENVIRONMENT

The Gooty Sapphire requires a vertically-oriented terrarium and thrives in naturalistic habitats that replicate their dry monsoon forest environment. Many keepers use cork flats and hollow tubes to create elevated retreats for these tree-dwelling tarantulas, while others use vertical lengths of 2-3" diameter bamboo with entrance slots cut into the hollow inside.

Ornamental tarantulas typically inhabit dry monsoon forests where twice a year rainfall becomes heavy, and do not thrive in excessively humid "jungle" enclosures. As with most tarantulas, warm room temperatures in the 70-80°F range are adequate, temperatures exceeding 82°F should be avoided, and a nighttime drop to cooler temperature is recommended but not necessary.

The Gooty Sapphire Ornamental Tarantula is one of several species of *Poecilotheria* that has an extra developmental stage. Independent and feeding spiderlings begin at 3rd instar instead of the usual 2nd instar. But they then grow quickly and with warm environment and frequent feedings may mature in eighteen months or less. Ornamental tarantulas including the Gooty Sapphire, grow fast, mature early and live 6-9 years in captivity.

HOUSING

Young Gooty Sapphire tarantulas can be started in 50 dram vials or similar jars, but we prefer to use 32 oz. deli cups with "fruit fly" lids to rear young spiders from spiderling to about 2.5" in legspan. Once the young ornamental tarantulas outgrow the deli cup, they may be housed similarly in clear plastic gallon jars or similar small enclosures.

Adult Gooty Sapphire Ornamentals are best housed in vertically-oriented terrariums. One popular enclosure is a 10-gallon aquarium stood on end with a custom front constructed and affixed to cover what would normally be the aquarium's top. These custom fronts are easily made of plexiglas with a hinged door and ventilation provided by small holes or larger diameter openings covered by aluminum insect screening. If DIY projects are not your thing, the ExoTerra glass terrarium 12"W x 12"D x 18"H or a similar habitat is perfect.

Most keepers do not use heat sources and instead keep their tarantula enclosures in a warm room that is usually in the 70s. If necessary a heat mat is preferred to an incandescent heat lamp that will dry out the enclosure and may reach dangerously high temperatures.

QUICK TIPS

- » 72-80°F with a drop in temperature at night (65-70°F) ideal but not necessary.
- » Requires 50-75% humidity, but also good ventilation.
- » Eats arthropods and small vertebrates and thrives on roaches or crickets in captivity.

Functional decorations for ornamental tarantula terrariums include vertical cork slabs or tubes, lengths of 2-3" diameter bamboo or other items that provide both climbing opportunity and retreat. Live foliage is good for both natural humidity and gas exchange, but many keepers instead use artificial plants for both beauty and cover. Live plants suited for low light situations are best as tarantulas are nocturnal and secretive and only subdued lighting is

recommended. For larger planted terrariums requiring direct fluorescent lighting a shaded area should be created with numerous hides that offer darkness.

FOOD & WATER

Gooty Sapphire Ornamentals will feed on a variety of arthropods and small vertebrates. Crickets are fine for young specimens, but 6-8 would be required to make a meal for an adult. Most keepers instead use tropical roaches. Active climbing roaches like *Blaberus discoidalis* are preferred to burrowers like *Blaptica dubia* that will hide, but the latter can be offered from rubber-tipped forceps or dropped directly into the spider's retreat. A weekly meal is sufficient. Water is mostly obtained from the food, but ornamental tarantulas may drink water droplets during occasional habitat misting and a slight spray once a week is recommended for young specimens. A water bowl would only be used in dire emergency and is only suggested for adults, but is a good safety net. Some keepers use elevated water bowls that affix with a suction cup to the side of the terrarium or similarly attach a small plastic condiment cup using hot glue.

SHEDDING

Adult tarantulas molt their skins approximately once a year, but young growing spiders will do so much more often based on food intake. When the abdomen becomes fully expanded the spider will cease feeding and will become dark and have a dull shininess. At this point more frequent misting is advisable to elevate humidity and ensure no troubles during ecdysis (exoskeleton sloughing).

HANDLING

Tarantulas are delicate invertebrates that may be fatally injured by a fall. They are hands-off terrarium pets best left alone. Ornamental tarantulas are nervous and defensive and their venom is known to be among the most potent of the tarantulas. DO NOT HANDLE. The well-known spider trapping technique using cup and a piece of cardboard to slide between surface and cup to cover the opening may be used to trap them safely to move them to a new enclosure.

