

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

WITH THE KIDS

Garden-variety reptiles

Joe Python's slithery critters launch Descanso Gardens series.

By Brenda Rees
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On an average week, Chrissy and Joe Martin's grocery list looks something like this: lettuce, squash, crickets, corn on the cob, mealworms and frozen rats.

When you have more than 80 little scaly and slimy mouths to feed at home, daily life is certainly a surreal experience.

The couple — better known as Joe Python and the Reptile Family — share their 1 1/2 -acre Thousand Oaks home with snakes, lizards, turtles, frogs, tarantulas, scorpions, millipedes and other assorted coldblooded wonders.

In addition to the never-ending feeding schedules, there's the constant cleaning, bathing and routine maintenance that keep the couple busy from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. "It can be exhausting at times," acknowledges Joe, a former operating engineer and Zamboni driver for the Los Angeles Kings.

"But the icing on the cake for us is when we bring them out for show," Chrissy adds. "That makes all of this worth it."

For 14 years, they have been living for those critter highs when they share their reptilian menagerie at schools, libraries and other community events.

The Reptile Family kicks off Descanso Gardens' popular Family Fun for Nature Nuts summer series Wednesday; the midweek evening programs feature educational and hands-on shows involving insects, wild birds, exotic mammals and more.

Dressed in safari clothes, Joe and Chrissy will bring baskets of reptile goodies to Descanso (many critters prefer the cozy wicker containers).

Expect to see leopard tortoises, boa constrictors, tree frogs and maybe even a Chinese water dragon. Because their animals are shown and handled regularly, the couple rotates which animals will appear in certain shows. After all, a tomato frog needs its beauty rest.

Overall, how do the animals feel about being out of their comfy home environment to be the star attraction? Any prima donnas? Scaredy skinks?

"I think it's kinda exciting for them," says Chrissy, a former elementary school teacher. "I mean, here's a new place for them with all sorts of new smells and sights. They know they will get fed more when they come out and work too."

While it's hard to get a snake to sit up or a lizard to jump through a hoop, Joe says they rely more on the animals' natural behavior — rather than tricks — for the meat of the show. "Our animals are very tolerant and are used to sitting still," he says. "We try to reinforce the idea to children — and adults — about the need to respect these animals."

Of course, winning over reptile converts is another goal. "We probably get 90% of our audience at the end of the show," Joe says. "There still are adults and kids out there who are going to be fearful of these animals even after seeing them and learning more about them."

But sometimes, gold does strike. Once, a 90-year-old woman was in the audience who said she was petrified of snakes. "She had recurring nightmares about snakes chasing her," Joe says. "By the time the show was done, we had her holding baby snakes in her hand. I think those dreams went away for her."

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Family Fun for Nature Nuts

Where: Descanso Gardens, 1418 Descanso Drive, La Canada Flintridge

When: Wednesday; gates open at 5:30 p.m. for picnicking; show at 6:30 p.m. Series runs Wednesdays through July 20.

Price: \$10; 2 and younger, free

Info: (818) 949-7980