

BLACK JUNGLE

A poison dart frog may be just what your home needs.

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A poison dart frog at home

When I meet Richard Revis, he is bounding between saltwater tanks, measuring out chemicals and scooping things from the water with nets. "There are always a million and one things to do," he admits, and he doesn't stop moving while we talk.

One look around Black Jungle Terrarium Supply in Turners Falls and I can see why he and his partner, Michael Wallitis, can't stop working.

Ten-gallon tanks teeming with plant and animal life are stacked floor to ceiling throughout the low-lying building on the outskirts of town. Tropical birds call from tall cages. Filtration systems for salt water tanks bubble in the background. Next door, the lush smells of a full-size greenhouse beckon. With so many life forms to keep track of, it's a surprise Revis can even put sentences together.

Moist, pungent air greets each visitor who ventures into the small storefront. The tanks, known as vivariums, house tiny enclosed ecosystems. Some are so steamy that their contents are invisible. Filled with miniature plants, mosses and ferns, they are home to another hidden treasure: hundreds of brightly colored poison dart frogs.

Revis and Wallitis started Black Jungle almost twenty years ago with a simple ad in the back of *Reptiles Magazine*. They were selling tropical plants. The two men had come across an unfilled niche in the exotic pet industry:



Once you begin spotting the candy-colored frogs crouching in the nooks and crannies of the tanks, it's hard to stop. The entire building is an ecosystem for them: in the tadpole breeding room, the newborns show off their lowly tails, while others display full sets of legs ready for land. In the fruit fly room, employees pack hundreds of these insects (the frog's main food source) into small plastic containers for shipment nationwide.

For Revis this began as a childhood fantasy. "I grew up in Las Vegas out in the middle of the desert where there is nothing like that, so I basically had to start everything in my mind," he says. "I said that one day when I was older, I would have some of these animals."

The passion that he and Wallitis share for this industry comes from the challenge of working with new species: "It's very exciting to work with an animal where there is so little known. There's that challenge of trying to figure out how it works, why it works, and why what we're doing doesn't work right now."

"We offer a little piece of nature for your home."
—Richard Revis

This goes for non-reptile species as well. For the last few years, the partners have been trying to solve the captive breeding puzzle for several varieties of toucans. As with the dart frogs, they are working on the cutting edge of the field. The birds make surprisingly good pets and are affectionate and very playful, according to Revis. After several seasons of extensive research, the coming year will provide a modest number of chicks to sell to the public.

The most recent addition to the store may not be affectionate and playful, but it's downright captivating. Pieces of coral—an alien-like life form that seems to exist somewhere between the plant and animal kingdoms—are showcased in several salt water tanks. Each piece is a testament to nature's creativity. In subdued peaches and teals or shocking greens and reds, these marine animals take the form of tiny trees swaying in the current; others form long tubes that reach out, dancer-like, toward the edge of the tank. Although the infrastructure for keeping them can be extensive, Black Jungle offers nano-tank options, which are geared toward the beginning coral enthusiast.

If you visited this highly specialized zoo without venturing

The curt-crested aracari, aka toucan



out to the greenhouse, your trip would be sadly incomplete. Next to the main store, a large enclosure holds hundreds of tiny pots with tropical plants of every color, texture, and size imaginable. Wild weeds reach up to the ceiling and wrap around themselves. Large palms and vines drip condensed steam; the air is thick and fragrant. It's perfect for whiling away a winter's afternoon, musing among the exotics that might enhance—or transform—the aesthetic of your home.

Although there are some local customers, the vast majority of Black Jungle's business is not done in the Pioneer Valley. Most purchases are made through its website, by hobbyists from California to Montana to New Hampshire. Plants and animals can be shipped to any part of the country with packing methods perfected over two decades. Revis and Wallitis

interiorview

also work with dozens of institutions nationwide: from the base in Turners Falls, they manage clients as diverse as Disney, the New York City zoo consortium, and aquariums and botanical gardens around the country. The men and their products can also be found at most national and regional reptile expositions during the year.

The storefront does get some traffic. Enthusiasts from across New England drive several hours for a personal visit. Local residents who wander in are often offered a crash course in herpetology (the study of amphibians and reptiles). "Sharing your knowledge is always part of the fun—helping people know how to do it so they can appreciate it as well," says Revis.

By the end of a visit to Black Jungle, it may be hard to resist buying some sort of plant or animal. It's probably a good idea—consider it the admission price for a visit to a one-of-a-kind greenhouse and zoo.



Can you spot the waxy monkey leaf frog?

Although both men agree that it's hard to explain their business because "we don't fit into any one category," there is a thread that pulls all their products together: the human spirit's undeniable attraction to the natural world. "In New England, you can be buried in snow for six months, but you can still have something alive in your living room—a plant or frog or coral reef," says Revis. "We offer a little piece of nature for your home."

Black Jungle has unusual hours and visitors should look ahead to make sure it is open. For more details, go to www.blackjungleterrariumsupply.com.

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