

Frequently Asked Questions about Chameleons

The survival of Cape Town's chameleons is at risk, mainly because of urbanisation. Normal Capetonians can help chameleons, by turning their gardens into suitable habitats to sustain them.

1. Why are Chameleons disappearing? How can I encourage Chameleons back to my property?

Firstly, please don't bring a chameleon into your garden yourself; rather make your property "chameleon-friendly", and let them come to you. (They will!)



If chameleons are not already in your garden, then there is a good reason why they are not. For some reason, your garden is not yet suitable habitat for them. What might look nice to your eye (neat-trimmed hedges and rolling lawns), might not be good for chameleons. Your garden may not have sufficient light, suitable vegetation structure, or prey (food) for chameleons. In addition, chameleons do eventually need to wander and spread out if their population grows, so if the neighbours' gardens don't also have suitable habitat, you have effectively trapped the chameleon in an area that is probably too small.

Another reason why you may not have chameleons is the presence of domestic cats. Domestic cats are not a species which is naturally indigenous to southern Africa, and although your cat may be very sweet, it will not hesitate to kill chameleons. This is just their instinct, and you can't blame the cat. If you don't have a cat yourself, your neighbours might, and while the mouse is away, the cat will play in your garden. In some neighbourhoods, the density of cats is so unnaturally high, that no small animals can survive. But in cases where there are only very few cats, other small animals like chameleons can sometimes still survive. (But see #2 because the garden must be planted "Chameleon-Friendly").

Yet another reason why chameleons might not inhabit your garden, is if you regularly trim or shape your bushes with pruning shears or electric hedge trimmers. This would obviously cut and kill the chameleons on those bushes, unless you are very careful. Similarly, if you use poisons or insecticides in your garden, this will kill not just chameleons, but also birds and other creatures.

Finally, in most provinces of South Africa, native chameleons are protected species. This means that by law, you may not remove them from the wild and translocate them, nor are you allowed to take them into captivity.

NB!!! If you see local South African chameleons for sale, they are NOT LEGAL. The best thing you can do is to report the activity to the law enforcement section of your provincial nature conservation body.

2. What's the best way to make my garden a home for Chameleons?

Make sure your garden is "**Chameleon-Friendly**". The best way is to plant indigenous, and be sure there are plenty of insects for them to prey upon. If your garden is right for them, they will move into it themselves. However, one chameleon friendly garden within the neighbourhood is not enough. Encourage your neighbours to go chameleon friendly too. This will create a set of **linked gardens** (a "**green corridor**") creating a larger sized habitat for a healthy and sustainable population of chameleons.

To be Chameleon-Friendly, be sure to plant plenty of **nice thick vegetation**, which differs in structure (diameter of perches for chameleons). This is because you need to cater for both adults and juveniles and they require different vegetation. Smallest chameleons need small perches to sit on, whereas bigger chameleons are uncomfortable on small perches and need larger ones. It makes sense. So for example, in the Cape Town area, it would be best to plant some restios and perhaps Erica's for the babies (low bushes and thin perches), and have this mixed with Rhus, wild olive and milkwood (higher bushes/small trees and thicker perches). You can vary the species, but be sure there is some differing structure.

Regarding food: The garden cannot be sterile and bug-free. This is what chameleons eat. So if you use **insecticides** you won't have chameleons, even if you have the right vegetation. They will not stay where there is no food. In fact, if you want chameleons, you should even make a compost heap to attract in the flies! Plant your bushes in the same area and it will make a very nice haven for them.

Not good for chameleons: grassy lawns and larger trees like oaks and pines. The reason is simple. Where ever would they perch themselves? They might cross the grass, but they need to sit somewhere in the bushes. Large trees have big branches, too big for the size of most chameleons. Far better are smaller trees, which have **low-hanging branches**, where chameleons can live.



3. I found a chameleon crossing a busy road. Should I take it home and release it in my garden where it would be safe?

Chameleons should never be taken from their home area and re-located for several reasons. Firstly, your own garden may not be good habitat for a chameleon, despite that fact that it looks good to you. If you do have chameleons already, you'd be introducing new individuals which could fight with, and drive out the residents that are naturally there. The best solution if you see a chameleon that seems to be in a dangerous situation, is to simply move it to a nearby bush or tree and let it decide where it wants to be.

4. What do chameleons eat?

Usually, chameleons eat only flies and other small insects, and serve as wonderful natural insect control for your neighbourhood. (Some chameleons in parts of Madagascar are so large (up to 70cm) that they can even prey upon small rats!)

