



## CARING FOR YOUR TORTOISE

### ABOUT TORTOISES

While there are over 50 species of tortoises, relatively few are available as pets. Most pet tortoises are captive bred and include tropical species with different habitat and care requirements.

There are several things to consider before acquiring a tortoise, such as:

- size and weight of the adult tortoise
- longevity – most tortoises will live 50 years or longer
- climate zone
- habitat requirements
- amount of and types of foods consumed
- compatibility – small groups with different species can be kept together (best with only one male)

### ENVIRONMENT

Tortoises come from different climate zones throughout the world. It is imperative that you replicate your tortoise's specific natural environment as closely as possible. Temperature, humidity, sunlight intensity, terrain, diet, water, and seasonal changes (including microclimates) vary, although some species inhabit a wide range of environments within a region. Since you may not know which area your tortoise is from, you may have to test a variety of options.

### TEMPERATURE CLIMATES

Greek, Russian (Horsfield's), Hermann's and Marginated Tortoises from southern Europe and the Middle East are popular temperate species. They inhabit different environs, from grasslands and forests to rocky hillsides and scrubland, and go through a moderate hibernation period. Their diet is heavy in grasses, leafy vegetables and fruit. These species prefer moderate humidity, generally 40-60%, with a less humid environment for the Russian tortoise (30-50%).

### ARID CLIMATES

Tropical species include Red-footed and Yellow-footed Tortoises from South America; Elongated Tortoises from southeast Asia; and some Hingeback species from Africa. These tortoises do not hibernate. Tropical tortoises need a humid environment (up to 80% but with a humidity gradient in the enclosure). Unlike some arid species, tropical tortoises should be fed occasional animal protein in the form of frozen pinkie mice, earthworms, slugs, canned cat or dog food, or commercial tortoise pellets.

### INSIDE ENCLOSURES

Habitat for tortoises varies by species and adults (see the table), but the minimum aquarium size is a 20-inch long (30-gallon) aquarium or reptile terrarium. Alternatives to aquariums include a large plastic tub with high sides, a child's wading pool, or a large custom-made polyurethane-sealed, plywood enclosure. The sides of the enclosure should be at least twice the length of your tortoise. As your tortoise grows, increase the size of its habitat. If possible, set up an outdoor enclosure so that your tortoise can spend the appropriate time (weather permitting) in fresh air and direct sunlight.

Your tortoise must have at least 12 hours of natural or artificial sunlight daily for vitamin synthesis to remain in good health. For indoor pets, an alternative to natural sunlight is a UV-B light (ultraviolet B) placed within four feet of the carapace (top shell) of the tortoise. This light must be direct, not filtered through glass or plastic.

Tortoises require a higher temperature than humans. Just as important, tortoise habitats should have a temperature gradient across the enclosure for both day and night so the animal can seek a comfortable area; see the table below for species recommendations. An under-floor heat mat designed for reptile tanks placed in a corner of the habitat and a 75-watt incandescent bulb over the habitat will provide the necessary heat range. Use a thermometer to verify the temperature: if it's too cool, your tortoise can develop respiratory problems; high temperatures can cause dehydration and death.

The floor of the enclosure should be covered with a substrate material such as reptile bark chips and cypress mulch; for some species, rabbit pellets work well. These will allow for easy maintenance, waste removal, burrowing and proper maneuverability (walking and climbing). The substrate should be spot cleaned and turned daily, removing droppings and uneaten food.

By including assorted pieces of flat rocks and wood, your tortoise will be able to keep its nails trimmed. Do not build places for your tortoise to climb, however. If a tortoise rolls over onto its back, it will not be able to right itself. Exposed to direct or artificial sunlight, it may succumb to the heat.

Tortoises need shelter for sleeping and security. A large domed piece of cork bark, half of a ceramic drain tile or a commercial hide box are suitable. Make certain the shelter is large enough to accommodate the entire length and width of your pet.

## OUTDOOR HABITAT

If your tortoise will be kept outdoors, the enclosure needs to provide protection from climate extremes, keep predators out, and be escape-proof. Tortoises are adept at digging, and enclosures should extend 12-24 inches below the surface. In addition, the area should be large enough to provide room for exercise, a basking site, a shelter for sleeping, and relief from hot, sunny days.

Use a thermometer at the tortoise level to ensure the proper temperatures are being met. Heat can be provided by an incandescent bulb (75-100 watt) or a heat lamp mounted on the interior roof of the enclosure, out of the way of the tortoise. Heated and insulated doghouses can be ideal shelters. If the daytime temperature in your geographic area continually is below 80-85°F, your tortoise should be brought indoors.

Add a removable basin for water large enough for the tortoise to soak once a week. A smaller container of water should be available at all times.

Herbicides and pesticides can be fatal to tortoises. If the outdoor unit is on grass, make certain no herbicides or pesticides are used. Be aware that ants, especially fire ants, can kill tortoises.

## DIET

Tortoises need a diet that is low in protein but high in fiber and calcium, primarily consisting of daily plant matter (spring mix, dark, leafy greens, and grasses/hay) and pellets. Fruits (berries, melon, kiwi, etc.) can be a smaller part of the diet.

Calcium and vitamin D3 supplements should be sprinkled on the food a few times each week. Tropical species benefit from a small amount of animal protein, such as a frozen pinkie mouse once a month for Red-Footed tortoises or earthworms for Yellow-Footed and Elongated tortoises. Commercial tortoise pellets can be fed occasionally, also providing additional animal protein.

Here are some foods that are safe for tortoises to eat:

Alfalfa	Aloe Vera	Parsley
Apples ( <b>no seeds</b> )	Beets	Spinach
Banana Squash	Broccoli	Summer Squash
Bell Peppers	Cantaloupe	Green Beans
Brussel Sprouts	Carrots, chopped	Kale
Chard Chicory	Corn	Peaches
Collard Greens	Escarole	Strawberries
Eggplant	Grape Leaves	Zucchini
Bananas	Hibiscus	

## AVOIDING HUMAN ILLNESS

Reptiles may carry bacteria, such as *Salmonella*, that can cause disease in humans. Check the CDC [Healthy Pets, Healthy People](#) website for information on steps you can take to stay healthy around your tortoise.

*This information is designed as a basic guide. There are several books and online resources available which provide in-depth information on tortoises and their care.*

