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Tortoise: Care and Husbandry

Tortoises originate from various areas of the world. They can range in size and weight depending on the specific species of tortoise. With the proper care, they can live to be 50-100 years old, making them a life term commitment. It is very important that you research your tortoise before purchasing it to be sure you choose the species that is right for you.



Your tortoise will need a large enclosure with a screen lid for ventilation. Substrate for the bottom of your enclosure can include paper towels, newspaper, butcher paper, terrarium liners, rabbit alfalfa food pellets or recycled paper products. Calcium sand is not a good choice because it can be ingested which may cause intestinal impaction. Wood shavings, walnut shells and sand are all inappropriate choices as these can be harmful if ingested, can carry parasites and irritating dusts and oils. The enclosure should be cleaned regularly usually once weekly will suffice; with water and a mild soap. Your tortoise will also need a shelter or house for hiding. Artificial plants and decorations may be used to create a more natural looking habitat, just be sure that your tortoise is not ingesting these decorations.

A clean water source should be provided in the enclosure and should be large enough for your tortoise to be able to soak in and climb out of themselves. The water should be shallow enough that your tortoise is not completely submersed since they are not good swimmers. Hatchling tortoises can dehydrate quickly and therefore soaking several times a week is very important. This soaking process should involve removing your tortoise from its enclosure and allowing it to sit in a shallow warm water bath for 10-15 minutes. The water should be shallow enough so that the tortoise can easily keep its head above water.

A heat lamp, ceramic heat emitter is important to maintain the appropriate temperature. The ideal temperature for a tortoise will vary based on species, but usually ranges from 85-100 degrees Fahrenheit with one side being slightly cooler (about 5 degrees) than the other. This difference in temperature allows your tortoise to cool off and avoid overheating. These temperatures are monitored with two thermometers, one on each side of the cage. Your tortoise should have 12 hours of daylight (white light) and 12 hours of darkness for its natural biorhythms. A timer purchased from a pet supply store or hardware store can be utilized to maintain this twelve hour light cycle. At night,

the temperature in the enclosure should drop slightly, about 10 degrees, as it would in their natural habitat. Night temperatures should also be closely monitored and ceramic heat emitters, red, blue or purple reptile night bulbs can aid in increasing night temperatures if needed. Always use reptile specific heat bulbs which have modifications that benefit the reptile and helps stimulates eating.

An ultraviolet light is essential for the health of tortoises. This reptile specific bulb produces UVA and UVB rays and is purchased from your local pet supply store. The UVB rays are important for the natural production of vitamin D which helps the tortoise absorb calcium from its diet. Without the UV bulb your tortoise cannot properly absorb calcium which leads to metabolic bone disease. UV bulbs for reptiles come in two different forms the compact (coil) bulb and the linear florescent tube. While there are many companies that produce UV bulbs, Zoo Med and Zilla are recommended. Follow manufacturer recommendations to determine the type of UV bulb you purchase, and the distance to place the bulb from your tortoise. All UV bulbs need to be changed every 6-12 months based on manufacturer's recommendations. After that time, even if the bulb still turns on it is not producing the vital rays your tortoise needs for calcium metabolism. Plastic and glass windows are designed to block UVB rays so keeping the tank by a window will not provide essential UVB rays. It is ideal to provide monitored time outside on a warm day in an escape proof enclosure with access to shelter. Natural sunlight is the best source of essential UV rays.

Hibernation can be dangerous to your tortoise if not done properly and therefore should only be attempted by an experienced keeper with aid from your veterinarian. Hibernation is an instinctual act, usually during the cooler months, during which your tortoise's appetite and activity will drastically decrease. This act is stimulated by your tortoise's natural instincts along with differences in the temperature of the environment and the shortening of days. Maintaining the same temperature and light cycle in your enclosure during the winter months will help prevent hibernation.

Some tortoises are herbivorous grazers and require a diet of high fiber grasses and greens. Grasses can include; timothy, orchard and alfalfa hay. Herbivorous grazers include; Russian tortoises, Leopard tortoises and Sulcata tortoises. Other tortoises are herbivorous meaning they eat mostly greens. Herbivorous tortoises include; Red Foot tortoises, Yellow Foot tortoises, Hermanns, Star and Spider tortoises. The best time to feed your tortoise is in the morning after having a few hours to warm up.

Acceptable greens include dandelion greens, collard greens, chickory greens, turnip greens, escarole, endive, romaine, mustard and turnip greens. Iceburg lettuce has no nutritional value and should not be fed. Spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and other cruciferous vegetables cannot be fed as they contain oxalates that bind calcium intake.

Vegetables can include green beans, peas, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers and bell peppers. Orange veggies such as carrots, squash and sweet potatoes are very good sources of vitamin A. Fruits should be limited but can include strawberries, cranberries, cherries, raspberries, blackberries, apples, grapes, cantaloupe, papaya, mango, melon, blueberries and bananas.

Safe plants to feed your tortoise include astible, baby's tears, Chinese lantern (flowers), chia, carnations (petals), california poppy, chrysanthemum (flowers), dahlia (flowerhead), day lilies (flowers), cornplant, ficus, geranium (flowers and leaves), forsythia, hens and chicks, impatiens, Johnny-jump-up, Hibiscus (flowers and leaves), hosta, henbit, hollyhock (leaves and flowers), mesquite (leaves), mulberry (leaves), nasturtium (flowers and leaves), petunia, phlox, pinks (petals),

spider plant (leaves), sedum and wandering jew (leaves), Pothos (Scindapsus) and Umbrella plants (Schefflera).

Unsafe houseplants include Dumbcane (Dieffenbachia) and Easter (Euphorbia). Meat products or cat/dog food should not be feed to tortoises. The protein in those foods is too high and can cause health issues including poor bone formation, bladder stones and liver problems.

Tortoises do not produce enough calcium themselves and therefore it must be supplemented in their food. This can be done by purchasing a calcium D3 powder from your local area pet store. This powder is sprinkled on food 3-4 times a week for juvenile tortoises (under one year old) or breeding females and 2-3 times a week for adult tortoises.

When picking up your tortoise be sure to support its body with both hands. Your tortoise will feel more comfortable and secure with something under its feet. Falling can be fatal to your tortoise so a two-handed carrying technique is recommended. It is also important to thoroughly wash your hands after handling.

An annual examination with a qualified reptile veterinarian is important to ensure your tortoise is in good health. Some health issues affecting tortoises include bacterial infections, respiratory infections, eye or ear infections, skin or shell infections and metabolic bone disease.