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CARING FOR YOUR TORTOISE

Tortoises make great pets and are easily cared for. They dwell on land and come from various parts of the world. They come in a wide variety of sizes and each has subtly different habitat requirements with some basic similarities that will be discussed below. It is important to research your specific species to know what the exact requirements are for his/her habitat.

Brief history:

There are over 285 species of chelonians (turtles and tortoises) in the world. Tortoises are land dwelling chelonians that are generally considered poor swimmers. The most common tortoises in captivity are listed below along with a picture and basic information on each species. There are many other species of tortoises. Some are endangered and protected, therefore it is important to check into any legal issues that may arise prior to purchasing a tortoise or keeping a found tortoise as a pet. Some tortoises hibernate over the winter.

Species	Example	General information
Sulcata tortoise (aka African spurred tortoise) <i>Geochelone sulcata</i>		Origin: Northern Africa Lifespan: 50-150 years (potentially longer) Adult size: 24-36 inches long, 100-200 pounds. Fun Fact: Third largest species in the world
Russian tortoise <i>Testudo horsfieldii</i>		Origin: Afghanistan, Northern Pakistan, Northern and Eastern Iran, North Western China and the Soviet territory Kazakhstan Lifespan: 50+ years Adult size: 5-9 inches
Red-footed tortoise <i>Geochelone carbonaria</i>		Origin: Northern South America Lifespan: 50+ years Adult size: ~13 inches long, ~30 pounds
Box Turtle (tortoise) <i>Terrapene</i> spp.		Origin: North America Lifespan: 60-80 years (potentially longer) Adult size: 5-10 inches There are multiple subspecies of box turtles and each has its own habitat requirements.
Leopard tortoise <i>Geochelone pardalis</i>		Origin: Eastern and Southern Africa Lifespan: 80-100 years Adult size: 18-28 inches, 40-120 pounds

Housing:

The housing requirements for tortoises can vary greatly depending on the size and natural habitat of each species and subspecies. The following are some basic requirements for all tortoises.

- Terrariums work best and should be comprised of solid walls and top to help trap heat and humidity.
 - o Smaller tortoises can be kept in enclosures that are 18X30 or 24X24 inches.
 - o Larger tortoises may require several hundred square feet of living space.
- Cage height is less important as tortoises live on the cage bottom (some species can climb).
- Substrate (cage floor covering)
 - o Use humid substrates such as medium to large wood chips mixed with peat moss, cypress mulch, or sand and soil mixture.
 - o Artificial turf makes good flooring as it is easy to clean and can't be eaten.
 - o Avoid sand, gravel, corn cob, small wood chips, etc as they can be eaten and cause impaction.
 - o Feces should be scooped weekly and substrate completely changed every couple of months.
- Temperature
 - o Heat lamps should be 18 inches above the tortoise to prevent burns. Night heat lamps should produce little to no light.
 - o Hot rocks can cause burns through direct contact and should be used with caution.
 - o Tortoises need a place to hide to feel secure, use plants or rocks for them to hide behind but avoid caves or hide boxes as these will limit their exposure to UV light.
 - o Air temperature should be measured in the shade
 - Temperate species: 75-85°F
 - Tropical species: 80-95°F
 - Ideally at least 70°F at night
- Lighting
 - o Should be provided for 12-14 hours daily using both white and full spectrum UV light
 - o The UV light source should be within 18 inches of the tortoise and should be changed every 6-8 months.

Feeding:

- Box turtles
 - o 75-85% vegetables and fruit (70-80% vegetable and 20-30% fruit)
 - o 15-25% box turtle food
- Tortoises
 - o 85-95% vegetables and fruit (70-80% vegetable and 20-30% fruit)
 - o 5-15% tortoise food
- Vegetable and fruit choices
 - o Dark leafy greens (ie spinach, collards, kale) and dandelions
 - o Avoid iceberg lettuce as it is nutritionally poor
 - o Use calcium rich veggies
 - o Should regularly eat 8-10 different vegetables and fruits
- Avoid high protein foods such as meats, dog food, cat food, or monkey chow
- If unable to feed commercial diets then add a protein source such as tofu, cooked beans, silkworms, earthworms (nightcrawlers), and slugs.
 - o Crickets and mealworms are calcium deficient and should be fed a high calcium "gut loading" diet for 2 days prior to feeding to the tortoise.
 - o Also, add 1 tiny pinch of a multivitamin-mineral supplement once weekly to food.
- Water should be available at all times and should be in a shallow (to prevent accidental drowning) heavy bowl that can't be tipped over.

Other great resources: The herpetocultural Library Series by Vosjoli

Desert tortoise adoption booklet

wildlife.utah.gov/pdf/desert_totoise_adoption.pdf