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CARING FOR YOUR WATER TURTLE

Turtles make great pets and are easily cared for. They inhabit both freshwater and land and come from various parts of the world. They are mostly small to medium sized with each species having 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. Turtles are streamlined and have webbed feet making them efficient swimmers. They breathe air but some can stay underwater for several hours and may even hibernate underwater over the winter. Females are usually larger than the males and have shorter tails. The most common water turtles in captivity are listed below along with a picture and basic information on each species. There are many other species of turtles. Some are endangered and protected, therefore it is important to check into any legal issues that may arise prior to purchasing a turtle or keeping a found turtle as a pet. Some turtles hibernate over the winter.

Species	Example	General information
Red eared slider <i>Trachemys s. elegans</i>		Origin: Mid western US Lifespan: 30-40 years (potentially longer) Adult size: males 7-9 inches, females 10-12 inches
Yellow bellied slider <i>Trachemys scripta scripta</i>		Origin: Southeastern US Lifespan: 20-40 years (potentially longer) Adult size: 5-9 inches
Western Painted Turtle <i>Chrysemys picta belli</i>		Origin: North America Lifespan: 30-40 years Adult size: 4-10 inches
Western Pond Turtle <i>Actinemys marmorata</i>		Origin: US pacific coast Lifespan: up to 50 years Adult size: 6-8 inches

Housing:

The housing requirements for water turtles should mimic their natural environment as closely as possible. The following are some basic requirements for all turtles.

- Aquariums work best and should be comprised of solid walls and top to help trap heat and humidity.
 - o Aquariums should be 18X30 or 24X24 inches.
 - o Height is less important
- Substrate (cage floor covering)
 - o ½ of the aquarium should be water and the other ½ dry land
 - o Use large rocks or artificial turf for the dry land portion of the tank.
 - Avoid using sand, small gravel, corn cob, wood chips etc as they could be swallowed and cause intestinal obstruction.
 - o A filter system can be used to keep the water half of the cage clean, if not using a filter system then the water must be changed daily.
 - o It must be easy for the turtle to climb out of the water area onto the dry area for basking.
- Temperature
 - o Heat lamps should be 18 inches above the turtle's basking area 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 Turtles 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. Covering one corner of the aquarium glass with paper will also provide a good hiding area to make the turtle feel more secure.
 - o Air temperature should be measured in the shade
 - Temperate species: 70-85°F
 - Tropical species: 75-90°F
 - Ideally at least 70°F at night
- Lighting
 - o Should be provided for 12-14 hours daily using both white light and full spectrum UV light.
 - o The UV light source should be within 18 inches of the turtle and should be changed every 6-8 months.

Feeding:

- Water turtles are mostly carnivorous but will occasionally eat leafy green plants
 - o Live food options include: Earthworms, slugs, silkworms and live fish
 - Avoid meats, liver, mealworms, waxworms, and crickets. They are calcium deficient.
 - o Leafy greens include: collards, kale, dandelions, mustard greens, and green leaf lettuce
- Aquatic turtle food pellets should comprise 25-90% of their diet
 - o Use vitamin and mineral supplements (a tiny pinch on the food weekly) if not able to use commercial diets.
- Water turtles will drink while swimming, therefore, water quality is very important.