

## **OUTDOOR TORTOISE CARE**

Tortoises can be outside during the warm hours in the summer months in the UK. If your tortoise is outdoors, it should be contained with a shaded area. Tortoises can dig out of gardens. Food and fresh water must always be available. Bring the tortoise indoors if the temperature drops below 20°C and before it starts to get dark. Finally, remember that tortoises can become prey for neighbourhood dogs, cats and foxes, so keep this in mind when housing a tortoise outdoors. Beware of lawnmowers, compost heaps or bon fires.

Having the tortoise loose in the garden is not advised. The tortoise can escape by digging, hide, hibernate in inappropriate conditions or be eaten by dogs, cats, foxes, herons or rodents depending on the animal's size. When constructing the run it is important to realise that tortoises can dig for up to a foot or more downwards to escape. Using concrete blocks down into the ground is advised. Tortoises can also traumatise themselves on the sides of the run. It is important to create a solid barrier so the tortoise cannot see out of the run. Repetitive head trauma from escape attempts can lead to bony infection of the skull, which can be fatal. Covering the run will prevent predation and reduce the risk of theft. A heated section will be needed. It is possible to construct a shed section or adapt a greenhouse for this purpose. Within this a heat source should be provided.

- In the heated area newspaper is recommended as a substrate. AVOID sand, gravel, wood shavings and cat litter, as these are not only difficult to clean, but can cause impaction if eaten on purpose or accidentally should the food become covered by these substrates. Outside a crop of grass, herbs and dandelions can be encouraged to grow to provide cover and food.
- Rocks (large ones) in the cage allow for basking. A hiding place is appreciated by all reptiles and should be available. An area to dig and hide under is required. Some thought to prevent collapse is needed. Constructing a hide of bricks and slate securely held together and filled with earth is a good idea. A cold frame is also useful made out of bricks and a sheet of glass, again securely held together. This provides a hot spot to heat the tortoise up quickly.
- For smaller tortoises a table top pen is advised. A small secure pen can be made on legs, which can be moved around the garden to catch the sun. Feeding levels and type can be strictly regulated. When it is cold the tortoises can be brought into their inside accommodation. This pen can have natural substrate, climbing and hiding areas and a water source incorporated into the design.
- UV-b light is necessary to provide Vitamin D<sub>3</sub>. Failure to provide UV-b light can predispose your tortoise to metabolic bone disease, a common condition of pet tortoises. Outside, of course, the sun provides quite adequate UV-b light on warm sunny days. You must make sure there is no glass or plastic interposed between the pet and daylight as otherwise an artificial UV-b source is also required.