

RED-FOOTED TORTOISE CARE

Red-footed tortoises are the most commonly encountered South American tortoise species. They do NOT hibernate. They inhabit a diverse range of habitat including dense forests. They can grow to 45 cm (1.5 feet).

ACCOMMODATION

- Humidity is important for this species and this has to be taken in balance with ventilation requirements. Thus although a floor pen or tortoise table can be used, vivaria are often also used successfully.
- Providing an area of damp substrate (for example within a cat litter tray) or a humidity chamber is important for this species. Substrates suitable for housing tortoises include newspaper, Astroturf, and some of the commercially available substrates. Natural substrate such as soil may also be used to allow for digging. It is important that the substrates either cannot be eaten, or if they are, do not cause blockages as this can prove fatal. Wood chip based substrates should never be used for this reason.
- Whatever accommodation is decided upon this should have solid sides. Wooden or plastic enclosures have the advantage of being able to be modified to increase ventilation.
- Hides are required to provide some security. Artificial plants, cardboard boxes, plant pots, logs or commercially available hides can be used. They should be placed both at the warm and cooler ends of the tank.
- The enclosure should be cleaned out at least once a week with a suitable disinfectant and spot cleaned daily to help prevent disease.

TEMPERATURES AND HUMIDITY

- Reptiles are ectothermic so a heat source is required.
- Typically a spot area is created using a spot bulb, providing a basking temperature of 35°C. This should be kept on all day. Temperatures must be measured to ensure the tank is not overheating especially in a small vivarium. The cool end should be maintained at 25°C.
- Background heat can be provided with a heat mat (on the back wall) a tubular heater, a heat plate or a ceramic bulb. This should be set on a thermostat so that the overnight temperature does not drop below 25°C.
- Temperatures should be measured with a maximum/minimum thermometer. During the cold winter months careful checking is required to ensure the heat sources are keeping the tank sufficiently warm. Heat sources should be guarded to prevent thermal burns.
- Humidity should be checked with a hygrometer and kept moderately high by spraying at regular intervals.

LIGHTING

- Red-footed tortoises must be exposed to UV-b light. However given that Red foots are a rainforest species they may not require such a potent UV-b source as other tortoise species.
- The best sources are the mercury vapour lamps which give out heat as well. This will need to be on all day for 12 hours and at an appropriate distance from the tortoise as recommended by the manufacturer. A small branch or rock can be placed below the basking site. Care should be taken using mercury vapour bulbs in a small vivarium as temperatures may become too high and these lamps cannot be fitted to a thermostat.
- Alternatively other UV-b bulbs are available (please ask for further information on UV light in reptiles)
- All UV-b bulbs should be checked regularly for their UV output and should be changed at least as frequently as manufacturer's instructions.

COMPANIONS

- In general the happiest tortoise is the solitary tortoise. Adults can be maintained in single sex groups of up to five in suitable accommodation. Should breeding be required the males can be exposed to the females during the summer months.

WHAT TO FEED

- Red-footed tortoises are omnivorous and their diet should consist of a wide variety of plant material although live food can be provided at least once per week. Suitable plant material includes fruits, vegetables and weeds. Suitable weeds include sow thistles, dandelions, milk thistles, plantains, chickweed, dock and bindweed. Other plants and flowers such as sedum, hibiscus, nasturtium and honeysuckle are also suitable. Any plants fed should be free of any pesticides or fertilizer. Supermarket fruits, salads and vegetables can make up 50% of their diet.
- Supplementation is important, particularly with supermarket bought goods and a mineral powder with high calcium content is required. It is important to ensure the phosphorous content is low. Cuttlefish is often fed to tortoises and although it is to be encouraged it should not be relied upon as a calcium source.
- Water should always be available and a container is required which will allow the tortoise to submerge completely. This should be changed daily. Bathing is also to be encouraged and twice a week the tortoise should be placed in a shallow bath of warm water (usually a cat litter tray suffices).