

SULCATA TORTOISE CARE

Sulcata tortoises are large tortoises, originating from the grasslands of sub-Saharan Africa. It is essential not to underestimate the space and resources needed to look after these tortoises which will grow very large. It is important to note that these tortoises do not hibernate.

HOUSING

- Tortoises make poor vivarium subjects. Ideally a floor pen or tortoise table should be created. This needs to have solid sides (1 foot high) for most tortoises. Many are made out of wood or plastic. As large an area as possible should be provided, but as the size increases extra basking sites will need to be provided. For a small juvenile at least 90 cm (3 feet) long x 30 cm (1 foot) wide is recommended. This is required to enable a thermal gradient to be created along the length of the tank (hot to cold).
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 35-40°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 20°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 low-moderate (<50%).

LIGHTING

- Leopard and Sulcata tortoises must be exposed to UV-b light.
- 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 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.
- It is also important to expose your tortoise to natural UV light during the summer months and building an outside enclosure is recommended for the long term health of your tortoise.

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.

SALMONELLA

- All reptiles can potentially carry Salmonella.
- However it is rarely a cause of illness in reptiles and treatment is not required.
- It can be transmitted to people (especially young children or those who are immuno-compromised) so good hygiene after handling the reptile is important. Generally washing your hands in soap is sufficient. There are commercially available disinfectants that can be used as an alternative.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

We recommend annual health checks every year for pet reptiles as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

WHAT TO FEED

- Their diet should consist largely of grasses and hay, with vegetation such as weeds making up the remainder of the diet. 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. Salad and vegetables should only be offered if these are not available.
- Supplementation is important, particularly with supermarket bought goods and a vitamin and 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).

50% of the diet should be made up of hay and grass but other dietary items include:

Dandelion	Hawkweed
Timothy Hay	Chickweed
Lawn Grass (Not Clippings)	Dock leaves
Clover	Plantain (all varieties)
Sow thistle	Bindweed
Milk Thistle	Groundsel
Honeysuckle	Parsley
Sedum	Sage
Grapevine	Coriander
Hawkbits	Watercress

Fine in moderation (up to 10% of the diet)

Spring greens	Carrot Tops
Lettuce (all varieties)	Hibiscus
Broccoli	Nasturtium
Cauliflower	Rocket
Cabbage	Pumpkin
Green Beans	Peas
Mange Tout	Spinach
Brussel Sprouts	

Diets should always be supplemented with appropriate vitamin and mineral supplementation as advised by your vet

For further information, see www.tortoisetrust.org and www.britishcheloniagroup.org.uk