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Tortoise Care

INTRODUCTION

There are many different tortoise species being kept as pets with Russian Tortoises, Leopard Tortoises, and Sulcata Tortoises being some of the most popular. Potential owners should research the species they are interested in as many tortoises can live 50+ years and some can grow to be over two feet in diameter and will require special enclosures.

HOUSING

Cage - Rubber Maid and other plastic containers or wood enclosures are recommended over glass aquariums for tortoises as invisible barriers stress tortoises out. The enclosure should be about 10 times your tortoise's length and 5 times its width. The height of the enclosure should be about 3 times your tortoise's length as they are very good climbers. Giant species will eventually need a custom enclosure.

Substrate - Paper towels, towels, reptile carpet or newspaper are the safest to use and highly recommended especially for hatchlings. As your tortoise gets older, a particulate substrate such as recycled newspaper product (ie Carefresh) can also be used. For species requiring higher humidity, damp cypress mulch can be used if needed. We do not recommend using sand, gravel, mulch, cat litter, or wood shavings due to risk of ingestion leading to impaction as well as irritation of the eyes and mouth. If you are using substrate other than paper towels and newspapers, it is recommended to feed your tortoise on a paper plate, bowl, etc to prevent the changes of your tortoise from ingesting the substrate.

Temperature - The enclosure should be large enough to have a warm side and a cool side to allow your tortoise to regulate its temperature by changing its location. Digital thermometers rather than dial thermometers should be used for accuracy. The probe of the digital thermometer should be placed at the level of the animal rather than at the top of the enclosure. At least two thermometers should be used, one to measure the cool side and one the warm side. The basking side should reach up to 90-95°F and the cooler side should be about 75-80°F. A clear incandescent bulb, red bulb, or ceramic heating element can be used to provide heat at the focal basking area.

Lighting - It is imperative that a UVB light source be provided for proper Vitamin D production and calcium absorption. A 10.0 ultraviolet B (UVB) light should be placed over the basking area (within 18 inches) for 10-12 hours daily. The light should not be placed over glass or plastic as these material block UV rays. The light needs to be replaced every 6 months even if it still works as UVB production decreases over time. You can expose your tortoise to natural sunlight during the warmer months. Do not leave your tortoise in an enclosed tank or container as this can cause overheating. Secure outdoor enclosures can be built (turtles can dig, so be sure to bury the sides). Always supervise your tortoise when outside unless the enclosure is completely secure to avoid the danger of predators (raccoons, dogs, cats).

Cleaning - Tortoises are very messy and food, waste, and shed accumulates in the environment quickly. Keeping your tortoise's enclosure clean is very important to keeping your tortoise healthy and prevent disease.

DIET

Tortoises are herbivores requiring a varied diet based on their age. The best time to feed turtles is late morning after they have had a chance to warm up and are active. A turtle not given the proper circumstances to feed will go on a hunger strike. Unlike warm-blooded animals, they aren't forced by their metabolism to eat. They can just slow down their activity level, retreat into their shells and wait for better conditions.

Greens - The majority of the diet for most tortoises should consist of a variety of grasses or hay supplemented with dark leafy greens such as collard greens, endive, mustard greens, escarole, dandelion greens, watercress, and turnip greens. Lettuces are not recommended as they have very poor nutritional value.

Fruit - South American species such as the Red or Yellow-footed Tortoises need fruits in their diets. Melons, kiwi, papaya, mango, berries, and bananas can be used. For other tortoises, these fruits can be fed as occasional treats.

Hay - Timothy hay, mountain grass, and meadow hay are good sources of fiber for your tortoise. Wait until your tortoise is about a year old before offering hay. Good quality hay can be ordered from OxbowAnimalHealth.com. Hay should be the majority of the diet for grazing species such as Sulcatas.

Grasses and Weeds - Grazing species can be fed a variety of grasses and weeds. These can be planted in your turtle's enclosure if kept outdoors. Links to purchase seeds for safe grasses and weeds are provided.

- Grazing Tortoise Seed Mix
 - http://www.carolinapetsupply.com/catalog/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=179
 - http://www.sulcatafood.com/All_Store_Items.html
- Links for Desert Tortoise Native Seed mix:
 - http://store.theodorepayne.org/product/SM_DTM.html
 - <http://www.desertseedstore.com/category/Tortoise-Forage-Seed-Mixes-Edibles-76>

WATER

Water bowl - Hydration is very important for tortoises, even desert species. Fresh water should be provided in a shallow, non-spill bowl. The bowl should be small enough that the turtle cannot climb into it, flip over, and drown.

Soaking - Tortoises should be soaked in shallow warm water for 15-20 minutes at a time. Hatchlings and young turtles should be soaked daily and misted 1-2 times a day. Adult desert species should be soaked once weekly and adult tropical species should be soaked 2-3 times a week.

HEALTH CARE

We recommend a complete physical exam, choanal culture, and fecal by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet tortoises. Thereafter, we recommend exams every 6 months with yearly choanal cultures and fecals.