



MEDITERRANEAN TORTOISE CARE

There are a few commonly encountered tortoise species from the Mediterranean.

- The Hermanns tortoise comes from Italy, France or the Mediterranean Islands depending on the subspecies.
- The Horsfield tortoise comes from Eastern Europe and Central Asia
- Spur-thighed tortoises may come from Europe, Central Asia or North Africa depending on the subspecies. It is important to know which subspecies. Not all subspecies will hibernate so it is important to know which type you have, and if you have any uncertainties it should be examined by an experienced tortoise vet. As examples Spur thighed tortoises from Southern Turkey, Tunisia and Libya and other North African variants, known as 'Golden graecas' do not hibernate.

All these tortoises have similar husbandry requirements, so the following care sheet will outline basic care of any of these species with any major differences noted. Different species should never be mixed due to the risk of disease transmission.

ACCOMMODATION

- 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. A large 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).
- Good ventilation is required and additional ventilation holes may need to be created.
- 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.
- Hibernation is a whole subject on its own, professional advice should be sought on the currently preferred methods of hibernation, and to check that your tortoise is ready to hibernate.

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.

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- 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 depending on the species. Horsfield tortoises can cope better with extremes of temperature but do not tolerate damp conditions well.

LIGHTING

- Mediterranean 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 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.
- It is also important to expose your tortoise to natural UV light during the summer months and building an outside enclosure is a requirement 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.

WHAT TO FEED

- Their diet should consist largely of 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. 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).

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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.