

## **HIBERNATING TORTOISES**

Certain species of tortoise hibernate, so it is necessary to keep them safe and healthy during this period. It's not just a matter of popping them into a box and forgetting about them for three months. Safe and successful hibernation requires work and forward planning. Only healthy tortoises should be hibernated!

### **Preparation for hibernation**

- Tortoises should be hibernated in late October to early December. However, preparations to ensure the tortoise is ready must start months beforehand.
- Only Mediterranean tortoises should be hibernated – ie Horsefield's, Hermann's. Never hibernate tropical species. It is recommended that young (under 3 years) or very small (plastron length less than 10cm) tortoises are not hibernated.
- Only hibernate healthy tortoises. They must have eaten enough in the preceding months to have built up adequate fat reserves. A full health check prior to hibernation is advised; if you do not feel confident undertaking this yourself then a vet will be happy to do so.
- Starve tortoises for 4-6 weeks before hibernation. It is very important that they are hibernated with an empty stomach to avoid colic and suffocation caused by gas build up.
- Tortoises also need to hibernate with a full bladder to avoid dehydration. During the week prior to hibernating, bath tortoises daily to fill their bladder.

### **How to hibernate**

- Tortoises should not be hibernated for longer than 16 weeks maximum. For smaller tortoises, 8-10 weeks is more appropriate.
- Double box the tortoise – place them in a small box, then place this box into a slightly larger box. Pack the extra space between the boxes with insulating material such as polystyrene. The box must be small enough so that the tortoise cannot move around and risk breaking out. Thought should also be given to preventing access from rodents.
- Hibernating tortoises should be kept at a temperature of 3 - 7°C. A small fridge is ideal for this as its temperature can easily be set and maintained, but the temperature must be checked daily to ensure there are no fluctuations. This is important to keep the tortoise's metabolism stable during hibernation.
- Make sure that hibernating tortoises are never exposed to freezing temperatures. This can result in frost damage, which can cause severe injury or death.

- Weigh the tortoise (inside the smaller box) every couple of weeks. Weight loss of more than 1% body weight per month is approaching a dangerous point and the tortoise should be woken. Tortoises should also be woken if they have urinated, as an empty bladder could lead to dehydration.

### **Waking up**

- Tortoises should be woken in March or April.
- Provide light and a constant temperature of 30°C to ensure that the tortoise is adequately stimulated. A basking lamp can be useful for this, or place the box near a heater.
- Bathe newly woken tortoises daily for a few days to encourage them to drink and to rehydrate them.
- Tortoises should eat within one week of waking. If they don't, this can indicate a husbandry problem or may be a sign of poor health – seek veterinary advice.

### **More information**

[www.tortoisetrust.org](http://www.tortoisetrust.org)

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