

Tortoises

The most common species kept in the UK are the Mediterranean tortoises – Spur thighed (Greek), Hermanns and Horsfield (Russian). Tortoises make great, fun, long lived pets if kept correctly.



Spur Thighed Tortoise:

- Have spurs on their thighs
- Live over 125 years of age. Some reports of up to 200 years.
- Average size 12-20cm plastron (underside of the shell) length, with males being smaller.

Hermanns:

- Have a horn like pin on the tail tip
- Live 50+ years (eldest was over 110 years).
- Can grow up to 28cm (plastron length)

Horsfield:

- Small thigh spurs and horn like pin on tail
- Live up to around 75 years
- 13-25cm (plastron length). Males slightly smaller
- Most common tortoise available currently

Indoor Housing:

This is required for the winter months and small tortoises year-round.

A tortoise table is the best indoor enclosure and is easy to make/acquire. The sides need to be at least as high as the tortoise is long, with a solid, easy to clean floor. A bookcase on its back, with shelves removed can be used as an effective temporary enclosure. They need to be as large as possible but at least 10 body lengths x 5 body lengths. Bear in mind youngsters will grow!

Heat: the table needs to have daytime temperature range of 22°C at the cool end and 31 °C at the hot end. Night temperature range is 21-24 °C. This is best achieved with a ceramic heat lamb situated at one end with a thermostat controller set at 31 °C. At night, depending on your house temperature, you may need a heat mat under the enclosure to keep it above 21 °C.

UV: tortoises rely on UVB light to convert the Vitamin D in their food into the active form. This needs to be a reptile quality UVB bulb (290-320nm) that is on a timer for 12-13hours a day, and located close to the table. This bulb will need changing every 6 months or so depending on the brand. Glass absorbs UV so putting the tortoise near a window will not suffice.

Substrate: Equal parts of dry compost and sand allow natural digging behaviour. You can also provide large stones and woodchips. This should be cleaned out at least weekly.

Hides: provide multiple hides in different areas.



Outdoor Housing:

All Mediterranean tortoises can be kept outside in the summer.

Outdoor enclosures offer a better quality of life for your tortoise and can be used for all tortoise sizes. There is plenty of fresh healthy food and the best source of UV from the sun.

Consider putting them out when ambient temperatures is over 15 °C. However smaller tortoises will struggle to maintain their temperature unless around 20DegC or above.



The enclosure or garden needs to be escape proof. The side height needs to be at least 2 x the length of the tortoise and ideally buried a few inches as tortoises, especially Horfield's, can dig. It is also important to have a netting/wire cover for smaller tortoises to protect them from birds, foxes and your pet dog.

Provide hides, shading to allow them to regulate their temperature. You also need a hard area, so they can get out of wet grass when they want to.

Larger tortoises can be free ranging in the garden if it is escape proof. They like a mixture of habitats – lawn, rockeries, flower beds and shrubs to hide under.

Housing – For small tortoises, simple hides are all that are required as you should bring them in overnight or during bad weather. For larger tortoises that may be out all the time, then a proper tortoise house is best. A purpose-built house or converted hutch work well. It needs to have a low ceiling as tortoises prefer to feel enclosed. It also needs to be raised off the ground a little to keep it dry.

Greenhouses and cold frames can extend the outdoor season considerably – remove a pane of glass at floor level and fit a flap, so then can get in and out easily.

Tortoises will aestivate (hide away) when it's too hot by either hiding away from the sun or digging. This is normal temperature regulating behaviour.

Be very careful if you have a dog, even if you think it is ok with the tortoise, they should never be left together unsupervised. Also make sure they are somewhere safe when the grass is cut!

Feeding:

In the wild, their diet consists of grasses, flowers and weeds.

Home grown foods are much richer in nutrients than shop bought, so try growing food in the garden in the summer or inside in the winter.

Suitable foods include: Grasses, Clover (flowers and leaves), Dandelions (leaves and flowers), Honeysuckle, Cats Ears, Hibiscus, Trefoils, Vetch, Sow Thistle, Hawkweeds, Grape vine leaves, Common Chicken Weed, Nettles, Plantago, Petunia, Pansies, Rose leaves and petals, Bindweeds, Mulberry leaves, Opuntia cacti pads (prickly pear), Romaine and red leaf lettuce (avoid all other types), Watercress, Chicory and Rocket. A mixture is best rather than just focusing on one or two items.

Avoid high protein foods such as meat, eggs, peas, beans and bananas. Also most of the cabbage species have the wrong balance of calcium and phosphorus so avoid these too. Fruit should be a rare treat. Pellets haven't been tested fully yet so we cannot recommend them.



Hibernation:

Most of the common Mediterranean species do hibernate in the wild but this is rarely more than a couple of months.

Tortoises must be 100 % healthy before hibernating. It is advisable they are health checked beforehand by a vet.

Young tortoises under 3 years shouldn't be hibernated. It is best to keep them inside on the tortoise table with the standard temperature ranges and light as stated above.

Before hibernation you should remove food for 3-4 weeks to allow the gut to empty. Daily warm baths help to ensure correct hydration and the passing of stools.

Start with only a short hibernation period of a couple of weeks. Then you can increase every year by a week. You should never hibernate for more than 2 months.

The most effective way to hibernate is in a fridge. It needs to be a frost-free type and one that isn't used for human food (reptiles can carry salmonella). Put the tortoise in a cardboard box with shredded paper. Then put this box inside another cardboard box for added insulation. A digital maximum/minimum thermometer probe should be put in the inner box and the readings checked daily. It must not go below 3.5°C or higher than 8°C. you also need to open the fridge door daily to allow fresh air inside.

Out houses, garages, lofts can also be used but with the milder winters we have had, it is hard to maintain the ideal temperature. Tortoises will start the hibernation process when temperatures are below 15°C and wake up if above 10°C. Freezing must be avoided as it can lead to permanent eye damage and even death. Also make sure the box is rodent proof. Unfortunately rats and mice have been known to eat hibernating tortoises.

Monitor their body weight every week and wake them up if they have lost more than 1 % body weight (i.e 1g per 100g body weight) from the start of hibernation.

On waking, re-introduce them to the warm tortoise table and bath daily. They should start eating within a week. If not seek veterinary advice.

Top tips:

- Spend time with your tortoise they are great characters! Check them daily for shell damage, make sure eyes are bright and nostrils clear. There should be no obvious breathing noises (except for hisses if they're cross!).
- Check and record their weight regularly; monthly is ideal.
- The shell is living so don't be tempted to drill a hole in the edge for tethering or attaching a tag. Tethering is also dangerous as they can get tangled, damage limbs and can't hide to regulate their temperature.
- Microchip your tortoise. There are very good at escaping!
- Waterproof trackers can be glued to the shell to aid finding them! Araldite/epoxy glue is the only safe glue to use. Do not use any paints on the shell.
- Although their natural habitat is the Mediterranean, they will thrive in the UK if kept properly.

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Scarsdale Vets
Pride Veterinary Centre
Riverside Road
Derby DE24 8HX
Telephone: 01332 678333
www.scarsdalevets.com

