

BASIC CARE: SULCATA TORTOISE

AFRICAN SPURRED TORTOISES (*GEOCHELONE SULCATA*)



Commonly referred to as sulcatas, are a hearty tortoise from the deserts of Africa. They do extremely well locally given proper care. They start off small and cute but grow to weights of over 75 pounds with exceptionally large individuals weighing more than 100 pounds. Please read the information below on how to properly care for these tortoises.

SETTING UP AN ENCLOSURE FOR A HATCHLING SULCATA

Dr. Johnson from Arizona Exotic keeps sulcatas, and wrote the following guide for clients who raise baby sulcatas:

Most people start off with young tortoises purchased from breeders and pet stores. Young tortoises are often kept indoors for the first few years to minimize risks of escape or harm from cats, birds, and dogs. There are some important things that need to be done to keep your tortoise healthy while housed indoors. The following information will help in providing proper care for young tortoises until they are big enough to do well outside.

A glass aquarium, plastic tub or trough, or other enclosures are often used to house young tortoises indoors. Substrates that can be used include aspen pellets, alfalfa pellets, or dirt. They live on dirt in the wild and can live on dirt inside. Make sure dirt used is from areas without pesticides or other contaminants that can be harmful to your tortoise. The enclosure needs to be as large as possible to provide areas to walk around and explore.

A hiding area needs to be provided. I recommend using hollowed out wood logs. Shell pyramiding is a common problem in growing tortoises. Recent research shows this condition has less to do with the diet and is much more associated with humidity in their environment. Indoor tortoise enclosures are often very dry due to the dry air in most homes along with heat lamps on the cage. In the wild tortoises spend much time in burrows underground where humidity levels are much higher. Humidity problems can often be resolved by soaking the wooden hide log in water 1-2 times a week. The evaporation will increase humidity in the hiding area and decrease chances of shell pyramiding.

Growing tortoises need direct access to UV lighting to properly grow and develop. There are several ways of providing UV lighting for reptiles. Be sure to purchase lighting specific for reptiles, UV lights for fish or plants will not be sufficient. One type of light is a fluorescent bulb. These come as a long tube 18-48 inches long or in a small coil that screws into standard light sockets. Growing tortoises need to have direct access to this lighting and it needs to be no further than 24 inches away from the floor of the cage. Fluorescent bulbs provide little heat. So, an additional heat lamp is usually also needed. The second type

of lighting is heat plus UV lighting together in the same bulb (Zoomed Powersun). These bulbs provide better UV lighting for a longer duration. Any glass or plastic between the bulb and tortoise will block out the beneficial UV rays. No beneficial UV light gets through your home windows either, so placing them by a window has no benefit. Taking baby tortoises outside, when and where possible, for natural sunlight is also beneficial for them.

There should be a cage temperature gradient during the day of approximately 85-95 F. Night time temperatures should remain above 70 F.

Feed a mixture of dark leafy greens and offer grasses and grass hay. Commercial pelleted grass diets (Zoomed Grassland Tortoise diet) can be soaked in water and also fed. Keep fruits limited to occasional treats. Grasses and grass hay are the best diet for the tortoises. While housed indoors it is good to soak them in a shallow water bath to their chin for 15-30 minutes once a week. Dust the greens with a calcium (without vitamin D3) powder a twice a week. Dust the greens with a multivitamin powder for reptiles once a week.

An annual veterinary exam and fecal sample test should be done annually to make sure your tortoise is growing normal and continues to be healthy.

Some people do things a little differently, still with success, but try not to vary too much from the basic plan Dr. Johnson outlined, or the suggestions below.

BASIC DIET FOR A HATCHLING SULCATA

It is a good idea to make up a week's worth of salad, refrigerate it, and dole out a small amount daily. Enough salad should be offered every day so that there is a little bit left over each night. This insures the young tortoise is eating enough to sustain a healthy gastrointestinal flora which helps with proper digestion and growth.

AS YOUR BABY GROWS

With proper care a sulcata hatchling will quickly outgrow its original enclosure and will need larger amounts of salad every month. Eventually, most sulcatas end up being moved to an outdoor enclosure. Adult sulcatas need a lot of space, at least 100 sq ft of floor space per adult tortoise. They can be kept as breeding trios of one adult male and up to four adult female tortoises, but there may be fighting depending on the individual personality. They have been known to kill and eat smaller tortoises so do not mix sulcatas that are of vastly different sizes.

Sulcatas dig long elaborate burrows in the wild to avoid the extremes of heat and cold of the Sahara Desert. They can actually undermine the foundation of houses and block walls if their burrows extend deep enough underneath these structures. Adult sulcata tortoises can push through chain link fence unless it has been deeply rooted into the ground and secured with stakes or a concrete foundation.

Your outdoor enclosure should have a day-night fluctuation of around 15°F, with a spring/summer/fall daytime high upwards of 95°F and a nighttime low of 80°F or lower. There may be spots that are much warmer as long as the sulcata has an appropriate retreat from the intense heat and sunlight. At all times, there should be a cool/hot zone of 85°F for the tortoise to retreat to if it is too warm or too cold. Sulcata tortoises are often kept outside with only a shelter against wind and rain in the Phoenix area as long as the temperature stays in the mid-50s or above. Sulcatas should be put in warm dry shelters when the weather gets colder or there are long periods of cold rain. Although many sulcatas have been kept

outdoors without any supplemental heat when nighttime temperatures drop below 60°F, this does put some individuals at risk of developing medical problems.

BASIC DIET FOR AN ADULT SULCATA

The enclosure should have a nice bed of sod, usually a mix of Bermuda grass, rye, and fescue. Sulcatas will graze throughout the day. Prickly pear cactus pads, mulberry and hibiscus leaves, and other ocess provides a rich mix of micronutrients that aren't present in the salad mix and as a result adult sulcatas kept outside tend to have fewer problems with malnutrition than tortoises kept indoors.

WITH PROPER CARE

Sulcatas have wonderful personalities when they are kept properly. They live for decades and seemingly become quite bonded with their owners. Most will outlive their owners if given the right care. Unfortunately, animal shelters and rescue groups are overwhelmed with unwanted tortoises that have outgrown their owners' households so you cannot rely on them to provide your pet a home when you are unable to do so anymore. Make sure you have friends, relatives, or other arrangements to care for your pet when you are unable to give them proper attention.