

## Basic Tortoise Care - Paula Morris

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For Herbivorous Tortoises Like Desert Tortoises, Horsfields, Hermann's, Graecas, Marginatas, Leopards, Red-foots, Yellow-foots, Sulcata & Others. See individual species' care sheets for specialized information.

Do not release captive specimens into the wild, even if they are found in the area you live. they can carry disease into wild populations. If the need arises to find a new home for your tortoise, contact your local club, Humane society, reptile veterinarian, or Turtle / tortoise person for help. While zoos will likely not take in animals, they can often direct you to those who may .

It is cruel and inhumane to drill holes in the shell edges for the purpose of tying up a tortoise or tethering it by the leg. Nothing such as paint should be put on the shell as it may cause shell deformity and slow death. If a tortoise must be marked for identification, using masking tape, dynatape, or a few strategically placed small dots of nail polish is suggested. You should know the law governing possession of certain species within your state and check with your local Department of Fish and Game and learn if you must have a permit to keep them. Call your local club or F&G for details, or search on-line.

All tortoises need large exercise areas, thrive in warm climates and need dry housing. Food, water and shelter from the sun and cold must be provided. A night shelter is required. Provide tamper-proof covered protection over your tortoises' enclosures at night to protect them from marauding raccoons and other opportunistic predators. These predators find turtle meat tasty and your tortoise has no natural defense against them. Better yet, bring your tortoise(s) in at night and put them outside on dry, sunny days in protected enclosures. Even crows and raptors have been known to carry away a smaller tortoise or turtle. You must protect them from both nocturnal and diurnal animals. Fog, a heavy dew point, or rain can dampen and chill a tortoise outdoors and jeopardize its health if it cannot dry off and warm up.

**FOODS:** Growing grass, clovers, grated carrots and yams, endive, escarole, and small amounts of romaine lettuce. All vegetables must be washed thoroughly to remove any pesticide residue. Dandelions and other natural weeds are optimum foods, plus rose and hibiscus petals are readily eaten (watch for pesticides!). Do not use insecticides of any kind on grass, plants or trees in your yard. A shallow dish of water must be provided for drinking and soaking in both indoor and outdoor accommodations. Beware of birds' droppings in the water outside; droppings carry diseases against which your tortoise has no natural defenses. This can result in costly, ineffectual vet bills down the road.

Food supplements are liquid/powdered multiple vitamins and prepared calcium lactate. Products formulated especially for tortoises include RepCal, Osteoform, and Vionate.

**ILLNESSES:** Tortoises are especially susceptible to respiratory ailments. Runny or bubbly nose, loss of appetite and gasping are symptoms of upper respiratory tract disease (URTD) or pneumonia. More tortoises die from pneumonia than from any other cause. It can be cured if

treatment is begun immediately and followed through completely. A veterinarian experienced in treating turtles and tortoises should be consulted to begin antibiotic treatments. For swollen eyes, wounds or other injuries, contact a vet. Call your local rehabber or club for a tortoise vet in your area, or click on the World Chelonian Trust's [Locating a Veterinarian](#) link to find multiple on-line resources. Sick or injured tortoises should be kept away from other tortoises and handled as little as possible.

Intestinal parasites are always a problem with imported tortoises. Symptoms such as loss of weight and lack of energy for no apparent reason are an indication. If the stool has blood, excessive mucous, a foul smell or parasite eggs or worms, get your tortoise to a vet immediately. If worms are even suspected, consult a veterinarian. He'll ask you to bring a fresh stool sample for parasite identification. Parasites are spread through fecal matter, so cleanliness is mandatory.

**HIBERNATION:** Usually in September or October (or as late as November, depending on the climate) as the days become cooler, some tortoises will eat less, bask less and appear sluggish. By this time most tortoises have already dug burrows or tunnels in which to hibernate. If not, the keeper must assist in providing a suitable place to spend the winter. Tropical species like Red- or Yellow-foots, Leopards, and Sulcata don't hibernate. For those species that do hibernate, some owners feel that a dog house insulated with a thick layer of dry soil or leaves is the ideal hibernation spot, although mold spores and other pathogenic particles can kill your tortoise if you use some grasses, hay or leaves; and soil has been determined to contain worms that may infest your sleeping tortoise. When the tortoise is settled for the winter, the burrow or house must be protected from rains and flooding by loosely placing a tarp over the entrance. Your tortoise should be able to set its own limits, but a good rule of thumb to follow is to not feed the tortoise for 3-4 weeks if it appears to be slowing down and readying for hibernation. This will guarantee that the food in its body will be digested and passed before hibernation. Any undigested food will decay, produce large quantities of gas and cause tympanic colic, which causes asphyxiation due to internal pressure on the lungs. It is also responsible for a number of serious, and usually fatal, bacterial infections. Please see the care sheet on hibernation for general guidelines.

**NOTE: YELLOW-FOOTS, LEOPARDS, RED-FOOTS, AND SULCATAS DO NOT HIBERNATE! THE ABOVE INFORMATION PERTAINS TO ONLY DESERT TORTOISES, HORSFIELDS, HERMANN'S, GRAECAS, AND MARGINATAS.**

Do not hibernate sick or injured tortoises!! One very important thing to note about a hibernating tortoise: if it has urinated while hibernating, bring it out of hibernation immediately! It relies on its water to stay hydrated during hibernation and if it has no water, it will perish. This is why you should frequently monitor temperature and check on your tortoise. Keeping or taking your tortoise out of hibernation is called overwintering and you should ask another tortoise owner how it's done. It involves keeping up its ambient temperature and lengthening its daily photoperiod. The tropical species which don't hibernate must be kept indoors in enclosures that provide protection from chill and have both heat and overhead UV-simulating lighting. Most of the tortoises in our care didn't originate in your area and you must approximate their natural climate and surroundings as closely as possible.

Please see the WCT care sheet on hibernation for guidelines. If, for some reason, you do not wish your pet to hibernate (runny nose, worms), it must be brought indoors and kept at a warm temperature (75-85° F) to assure its activity. In this case it will require room for exercising and

regular feedings. Most tortoise keepers agree that hatchling tortoises of species that hibernate should remain active for the first two-three winters, i.e., not hibernate.

It should be noted that turtle and tortoise care research is ongoing. As new information becomes available we share this on the World Chelonian Trust web site at [www.chelonia.org](http://www.chelonia.org). Serious keepers find it to be a benefit to have the support of others who keep these species. Care is discussed in our free online email community, which may be joined from the web address above. Please contact us about the many benefits of becoming a member of the World Chelonian Trust.

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