Aurora ANIMAL + HOSPITAL
www.AuroraAnimalHospital.com (303)680-7305

Russian Tortoise Care

Please note these care sheets are intended for the average reptile owner to ensure that your pet is receiving basic care needed to have a healthy life and there are other aspects of advanced care that can be considered for healthy pets.

Brief Description

The Russian Tortoise *(Testudo horsfieldii)* is a popular pet due to its small size and interactive personality. Native to central Asia, almost all available Russian Tortoises are wild caught as young adults (10-20 years old) and then imported for sale in the US, although captive bred babies may be available. When scared tortoises will withdraw their body into their shell and their armored front legs will protect their head. The shell is living tissue and should never be pierced or painted. Adult size is 6-10" on average.



Sexing

The males will have longer tails the females and once mature the plastron (bottom part of the shell) will be concave and a longer, more pointed tail with a longer distance between vent and tail tip than the stubby tail of females where the vent is closer to the shell.

Lifespan

With proper care the average expected lifespan is 40-80 years on average.

Caging

Tortoises need large enclosures and should be in a 40 gallon tank or larger. An outdoor enclosure safe from predators or escape attempts is very beneficial when weather permits. Large containers such as Rubbermaid storage boxes or livestock troughs can also be used for enclosures successfully and inexpensively. There should be one or two things for your tortoise to hide under – fake cave, half log (least favorite option), half buried clay pot, etc. Outdoor pens will need to be secure to keep tortoises in and predators (especially dogs) out.

Substrate

Tortoises should be able to make shallow burrows in the substrate so a mixture of several of the following is best: organic soil, coco coir, peat moss, sphagnum moss, dead leaves. Cypress mulch can be used successfully although it typically quite dry and dusty. Avoid cedar/pine/aspen mulches, carefresh bedding, alfalfa pellets, and sand. Live plants can be planted directly in the substrate or kept in pots to provide cover and enrichment for your turtle.

Lighting and Temperature

Reptiles need a warm place to bask (**80-90 degrees**) on one side of the cage in order digest food and nutrients properly. The other side of the cage should be cooler (**70 degrees**) so they don't overheat. A thermometer should be placed at the same level of the pet in the basking area to accurately measure temperatures. Lights should be on for 10-12 hours each day and then total darkness at night. Night temperatures can safely drop to 65 degrees so a night time heat source is not necessary in most homes.

Tortoises MUST have UVB light to survive and a lack of UVB will lead to Metabolic Bone Disease, severe illness, and death. A bulb that specifically provides UVB is necessary as UVB does not penetrate glass or plastic, so having the cage near a window is not adequate. T5 or T8 Zoo Med Reptisun 10.0 or Arcadia 12% are the preferred high quality brands. After about 6 months of use the bulbs will stop emitting adequate levels of UVB, even though they are still shining, so it's important to change the bulb every 6 months.

Humidity

Humidity in the enclosure should be 35-50%. This should be measured by a hygrometer.

Water

A shallow water dish at least as big as your tortoise with fresh water must be available at all times. It should be stable, so it cannot be spilled, and it should be easy to climb in and out of from all sides. The dishes used under potted plants are excellent for water dishes and inexpensive. Tortoises enjoy full body soakings but often defecate in their water so it needs to be cleaned often.

Food

Tortoises are herbivores and need a variety of high quality vegetables and grasses. Grasses ideally should be the mainstay of your tortoise's diet and can be grown in the enclosure itself or in shallow dishes (like pie plates) and then offered to your tortoise to graze on. Fruit and a few Mazuri tortoise pellets (soaked in water until mushy) can be offered once or twice a week in addition to vegetables as treats. Uneaten food should be removed after 24 hours. The following is a short list of commonly used food.

Staple Ingredients (Highest in calcium and other nutrients)					
Fresh grasses: *Bermuda, wheatgrass, fescue, bluegrass, orchardgrass, buffalo grass*					
 Collard Greens	 Turnip Greens	 Mustard Greens	 Escarole	 Endive	 Dandelion

Good Ingredients for treats – should be less than 10% of the diet					
 Sweet Potato	 Cactus Pads	 Yellow Squash	 Butternut Squash	 Kale	 Flowers

Avoid These Ingredients (Low in calcium and/or high in phosphorus, oxalates, goitrogens)
Cabbage, iceberg lettuce, spinach, broccoli, tomatoes, corn, grains, beans, bread, cereal, meat, eggs, dog food, cat food, fish food, vertebrates (pinkies, lizards).

Supplementation

A powdered calcium supplement (without phosphorus) should be used lightly sprinkled over the food 1-2 times weekly. A piece of cuttlebone in the enclosure will provide calcium and keep the beak short. Repashy Calcium Plus is a great supplement that tastes better than plain powdered calcium for the picky eaters.

Examples of suitable indoor enclosures:





Hibernation

Russian Tortoises do hibernate in their natural environments but in captivity it is a debated topic. If kept indoors, hibernation is not necessary and tortoises will not hibernate if warm temperatures are maintained. If hibernation is attempted then tortoises need to be fasted at least two weeks before temperatures are gradually reduced to 40-45 degrees, then maintained at that range consistently (24 hours a day) until hibernation is over. Temperatures not cold enough to hibernate but not warm enough to have normal activity causes illness and severe digestive problems. There are risks with hibernation so proceed with caution (see additional handout on hibernation).