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Leopard Tortoise: Care and Husbandry

Leopard tortoises are brightly marked, high domed tortoises that originate in the savannahs of Africa from Sudan to the southern Cape. Leopard tortoises are the fourth largest tortoise in the world and reach an average length of 18-24 inches and weigh up to 50-100 pounds; with males typically being larger than females. They reach sexual maturity at about six years of age in captivity. With the proper care your leopard tortoise can live to be 50-100 years old, making them a lifetime commitment.



Your tortoise will need a large enclosure with a screen lid for ventilation. Substrate for the bottom of your enclosure may include paper towels, newspaper, butcher paper, terrarium liners, rabbit alfalfa food pellets or recycled paper products. Calcium sand is not a good choice because it can be ingested which may cause intestinal impaction. Wood shavings, walnut shells and sand are all inappropriate choices as these can be harmful if ingested, may contain parasites and irritating dusts and oils. The enclosure should be cleaned regularly usually once weekly will suffice; with water and a mild soap. Your tortoise will also need a shelter or hiding house in the enclosure. Artificial plants and decorations may be used to create a more natural looking habitat, but make sure that your tortoise is not ingesting these decorations.

A clean water source should be provided in the enclosure. The water dish needs to be large enough for your tortoise to be able to soak in and climb out of themselves. The water should be shallow enough that your tortoise is not completely submerged since they are not good swimmers. Hatchling tortoises can dehydrate quickly and therefore soaking several times a week is very important. This soaking process should involve removing your tortoise from its enclosure and allowing it to sit in a shallow warm water bath for 10-15 minutes. The water should be shallow enough so that the tortoise can easily keep its head above water.

A heat lamp, ceramic heat emitter is important to maintain the appropriate temperature. The ideal temperature for a leopard tortoise is 82-100 degrees Fahrenheit with one side being slightly cooler (about 5 degrees) than the other. This difference in temperature

allows your tortoise to cool off and avoid overheating. These temperatures are monitored with two thermometers, one on each side of the cage. Your tortoise should have 12 hours of daylight (white light) and 12 hours of darkness for its natural biorhythms. A timer purchased from a pet supply store or hardware store can be utilized to maintain this twelve hour light cycle. At night, the temperature in the enclosure should drop slightly, about 10 degrees, as it would in their natural habitat. Night temperatures should also be closely monitored and ceramic heat emitters, red, blue or purple reptile night bulbs can aid in increasing night temperatures if needed. Always use reptile specific heat bulbs which have modifications that benefit the reptile and helps stimulates eating.

An ultraviolet light is essential for the health of leopard tortoises. This reptile specific bulb produces UVA and UVB rays and is purchased from your local pet supply store. The UVB rays are important for the natural production of vitamin D which helps the tortoise absorb calcium from its diet. Without the UV bulb your tortoise cannot properly absorb calcium which leads to metabolic bone disease. UV bulbs for reptiles come in two different forms the compact (coil) bulb and the linear florescent tube. While there are many companies that produce UV bulbs, Zoo Med and Zilla are recommended. Follow manufacturer recommendations to determine the type of UV bulb you purchase, and the distance to place the bulb from your leopard tortoise. All UV bulbs need to be changed every 6-12 months based on manufacturer's recommendations. After that time, even if the bulb still turns on it is not producing the vital rays your tortoise needs for calcium metabolism. Plastic and glass windows are designed to block UVB rays so keeping the tank by a window will not provide essential UVB rays. It is ideal to provide monitored time outside on a warm day in an escape proof enclosure with access to shelter. Natural sunlight is the best source of essential UV rays.

Heat rocks should not be used as they can cause burns since reptiles do not sense a "localized" temperature. Heating pads under the tank may be used with supervision. Place your hand on the area of the tank with the heating pad; if it is too hot for your hand to rest on for long periods of time then it is too hot for your tortoise.

Leopard tortoises are herbivorous grazers and require a high fiber grass diet with supplemental greens. The best time to feed your tortoise is in the morning after having a few hours to warm up. Grasses can include timothy, orchard and alfalfa hay. Greens include dandelion greens, collard greens, chickory greens, turnip greens, escarole, endive, romaine, mustard, and turnip greens. Iceburg lettuce has no nutritional value and should not be fed. Spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and other cruciferous vegetables cannot be fed as they contain oxalates that bind calcium intake.

Leopard tortoises may be offered vegetables including green beans, peas, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers and bell peppers. Orange veggies such as carrots and squash are very good sources of vitamin A. Fruits should be limited but can include; strawberries, cranberries, cherries, raspberries, blackberries, apples, grapes, cantaloupe, papaya, mango, melon, blueberries and bananas.

Safe plants to feed your tortoise include astilbe, baby's tears, Chinese lantern (flowers), chia, carnations (petals), california poppy, chrysanthemum (flowers), dahlia

(flowerhead), day lilies (flowers), cornplant, ficus, geranium (flowers and leaves), forsythia, hens and chicks, impatiens, Johnny-jump-up, Hibiscus (flowers and leaves), hosta, henbit, hollyhock (leaves and flowers), mesquite (leaves), mulberry (leaves), nasturtium (flowers and leaves), petunia, phlox, pinks (petals), spider plant (leaves), sedum and wandering jew (leaves).

Meat products or cat/dog food should not be fed to tortoises. The protein content of these foods is too high and can cause health issues, including poor bone formation, bladder stones and liver problems.

Tortoises do not produce enough calcium themselves and therefore it must be supplemented in their food. This can be done by purchasing a calcium D3 powder from your local area pet store. This powder is sprinkled on food 3-4 times a week for juvenile tortoises (under one year old) or breeding females and 2-3 times a week for adult tortoises.

When picking up your tortoise be sure to support its body with both hands. Your tortoise will feel more comfortable and secure with something under its feet. Falling can be fatal to your tortoise so a two-handed carrying technique is recommended. It is also important to thoroughly wash your hands after handling.

An annual examination with a qualified reptile veterinarian is important to ensure your tortoise is in good health. Some health issues affecting tortoises include bacterial infections, respiratory infections, eye or ear infections, skin or shell infections and metabolic bone disease.