



Sulcata Tortoises

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The Sulcata or African Spurred tortoise (*Geochelone sulcata*) is the third largest tortoise in the world, and in captivity can grow more than 45cm and up to 30-45kg. It is therefore, essential not to underestimate the space and resources needed to look after these tortoises. In their natural habitat on the southern edge of the Sahara, they move around grazing on grasses and vegetation, which supply all the moisture they need. They do not hibernate, as in their natural environment winter is a dry season, not a cold season so they should not be hibernated in captivity. In fact, in the wild, keeping cool is a main priority, and these tortoises often choose to wallow in mud to cool down, or hide in burrows, which remain cool and moist during the hottest part of the day.

Scientific Classification

Sulcata tortoises belong to the Order Chelonia, Suborder Cryptodira, Family Testudinidae, Genus Geochelone.

Legal Requirements

Most common pet tortoises are all now listed on Appendix II of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), which means that they may no longer be imported, sold, offered for sale or otherwise traded within Europe without a special licence. An unlicensed tortoise may be given away or kept as a private pet, but registration of all tortoises is compulsory before buying or selling, and tortoises may be microchipped once they reach a sufficient size (over 100mm long). Trade collecting, import and sale of wild tortoises of these species is prohibited totally.

General care

Tortoises should have access to both an indoor heated area, and an outdoor area where they can forage and enjoy the natural sunlight in the summer.

The indoor area will need to be a purpose-built open-topped enclosure or shed, and should be easy to clean, insulate and keep secure. Aquariums or vivariums will not provide suitable accommodation even for younger tortoises as ventilation is poor.

The outdoor area may be an enclosed garden or purpose-built enclosure, but should also be secure and provide shade and places for tortoises to safely hide. Any ponds or waterways should be well fenced off.

Hygiene

The enclosure should be "spot-cleaned" daily to remove any droppings or uneaten greens. Once a week, the whole enclosure can be cleaned with a disinfectant suitable for reptiles (further details of suitable disinfectants can be obtained from your vet). It is important to always wash your hands thoroughly after handling reptiles as they can carry Salmonella.

Substrate

It is important to use a substrate that is easy to keep clean and replace, and is not going to cause a problem if accidentally eaten. Newspaper therefore makes the ideal substrate, and shredded paper or hay can provide a suitable bedding area.



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Temperature

Reptiles are not capable of regulating their own temperature so it is very important to keep their environment at an appropriate temperature at all times. A temperature gradient should therefore be provided, giving your reptile a hot end where they can bask and a cooler end to which they can retreat.

There are several types of heat sources available including ceramic heaters (infra red light bulbs), tube heaters, reflector bulbs (incandescent spot lights) and heat mats. Incandescent spotlights will provide the ideal basking spot, whereas heat mats on the ground are not a natural way for tortoises to absorb heat. If a heat mat is used, it should be attached to the wall of the enclosure to provide background heat only.

It is important whichever form of heating is chosen, to always use some form of thermostat so that temperature can be accurately controlled. Heat sources should also be protected with a wire mesh guard or similar safety device if they are within a tortoise's reach.

The ideal temperature range at which to keep these tortoises would be **25-35°C (77-95°F)** in the daytime, with a basking spot up to **50°C (122°F)**, and temperatures falling no lower than **17°C (63°F)** at night.

Humidity

This should ideally be measured with a hygrometer and kept moderate (40-75 %) similar to the humidity levels in the tortoise's burrows

Lighting

Ideally, tortoises will be exposed to as much natural sunlight as possible, but in our colder climate this is often not possible so it is necessary to provide supplementary lighting too. Tortoises need to have access to both UVA and UVB rays, which many supposedly "full spectrum" reptile bulbs do not supply, so it is important to check this before purchasing a bulb. UVB rays are very important to allow a reptile to produce Vitamin D, which is essential for the absorption and use of calcium. Without this reptiles are at risk of developing Metabolic Bone Disease, which can often be fatal.

Various different types of UVB lights are available. It is important to check the percentage of UV supplied by the bulb. Indoor tortoises require at least 5% UV output. UV lights should be left on for 10-14 hours daily and replaced every 6 months.

Diet

Sulcata tortoises are naturally herbivores, browsing on a variety of different grasses and vegetation. In captivity therefore, naturally grown grasses should make up at least 75%-80% diet, with the remaining 20-25% being certain palatable greens. The ideal diet should be high in fibre, low in protein and high in calcium to ensure good digestive tract function and smooth shell growth. Peas, beans and other legumes contain high levels of protein so are not suitable for general feeding. Fruits or other sugary foods are also not suitable, often disturbing the natural balance of the tortoise's guts. Overfeeding is a common problem which can lead to health problems so should be avoided.

Suggested plants are listed on the attached diet sheet.

Fresh food and water should be supplied once daily, with water available in a large shallow dish in which a tortoise can bathe.

It is also important to supplement the diet twice weekly with a calcium/vitamin powder, especially in those tortoises kept indoors. A simple calcium supplement such as cuttlefish may be supplied daily.



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Lifespan

Sulcata tortoises in captivity can live 80-100 years

Signs of Health

A healthy tortoise will be bright and alert with clear open eyes and nostrils and a clean vent. The shell should be smooth and undamaged. Your tortoise should also be keen to eat, and pass faeces at least every 2-3 days. It is important to become familiar with your tortoise's normal appearance, movement and behaviour, in order that signs of illness can be noticed at an early stage.

It is advisable to take your tortoise to a vet who routinely deals with reptiles for a general health check and faecal sample at least once a year.

Signs of Illness

Reptiles will often not show obvious signs of illness until they are very sick, but you should look out for any changes in appetite or faeces passed, as well as changes in behaviour or breathing. Other signs of illness include discharges from the eyes, nose or mouth.

If you have any concerns, do not hesitate to contact a reptile vet as soon as possible.

This caresheet is only intended as a general guideline, so please ask for further information.

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