



BASIC DESERT TORTOISE (Gopherus agassizii) CARE REQUIREMENTS

It is illegal to take a desert tortoise from the wild, however, captive specimens may be kept under provision of a desert tortoise permit, granted at no cost by the Dept. of Ca. Fish and Game. Once captive, they **MAY NOT** be returned to the wild. All CTTC chapters can provide desert tortoises and permits.

Keeping a desert tortoise successfully in captivity requires understanding their needs and some pre-planning, resulting in an easy to keep companion. They require grasses, weeds, flowers, sunshine, shade, water, protection from predators, with provision of a safe place to “hibernate” during the months of @ Halloween till sometime in early spring, generally March to April. **NO ACCESS TO UNFENCED SWIMMING POOLS/PONDS.** (Hatchlings and small babies are generally not recommended for first time tortoise keepers, nor are tortoises recommended for small children as they are not a dog or cat that enjoy being played with, and, as with all reptiles, can harbor Salmonella which can be transmitted via contact.)

The below is ***very basic info***, it is highly recommended that further information be acquired and implemented via the sites recommended

HABITAT/ENCLOSURE: *Outdoors recommended over indoors!!*

1. Secure fencing that cannot be seen through nor dug under (wooden fences need concrete footing). Chain link fencing needs the bottom 18 inches covered with a solid barrier to prevent foot/head trapping and should also be buried at least 12 inches to prevent dig outs. If a tortoise can see through or under a fence it **will** try to escape.
2. Areas in which it can access the sun with plenty of shade available, from bushes/trees, etc. to allow the tortoise to escape the heat of the sun. ***Majority of their life is spent underground, not in the hot sunshine!*** The area of the burrow/shelter needs to be kept dry. If using a dog house or other above ground shelter, it needs to be placed in the shade as in full sunshine it becomes an oven and can quickly dehydrate the tortoise. If tortoise burrows, protect from flooding.
3. Protection from dogs, coyotes, raccoons, hawks, owls and ravens, especially when small. Tortoises have no defense against these predators and should not be kept with most dog species (with few exceptions).

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DIET:

Basic diet should be grasses, weeds, wildflowers, very select grocery greens and consisting of large variety at all times. Tortoises kept on diets of only grocery greens, fruits, & vegetables and commercially prepared tortoise foods from pet stores are often victims of health issues, including Metabolic Bone Diseases (“Pyramiding”, overgrown beaks, bladder stones, etc). Their shell should be rounded and smooth, NOT bumpy, flat or sunken in.

HIBERNATION:

A desert tortoise needs to not be fed for @ 2 weeks prior to the “hibernation” period. Provision of a cardboard box lined with newspapers, kept in an area (garage, unheated closet, etc., NOT on concrete flooring) that maintains constant temperatures of @ 45-55 degrees F (use a minimum/maximum thermometer to be sure) is the most used method of keeping tortoises during this period. Care must be taken to protect from rats and mice. They DO NOT drink nor eat during this time. Periodic (@ bi-weekly) checks are done to ensure no health issues are arising, such as runny nose, dehydration.

DISEASE:

Most common illnesses:

1. URTD (characterized by runny nose), which requires treatment by experienced tortoise veterinarian.
2. MBD (characterized by bumpy “Pyramided” or sunken in shells), indicative of improper diet/habitat issues, requiring further research/ correction of care provided.

As stated, this sheet should be considered a very basic guideline of care requirements, and it is **HIGHLY** suggested that the following sites be consulted for examples of diet recommendations, shelter designs, etc. There are differences of opinion expressed, I recommend you take the common suggestions and implement them. Join our Yahoo group and ask questions as tortoise care info is constantly changing as we learn more.

RECOMMENDED SITES FOR FURTHER INFO

www.tortoise.org CTTC main care sheet

<http://www.chelonia.org/Articles/Gagassiziicare.htm> basic care info

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