

Warning – Hibernation Time!

Why a warning? Because what is so natural and well done in the wild can be so very difficult and dangerous and even fatal in captivity. Lets face it, everybody – desert tortoises know a lot more about this than we do. Even the most experienced tortoise people dread this time of year.

After hibernation the last couple of seasons, the adoption committee learned of a number of California Desert and Texas tortoises that became ill or even DIED during hibernation.

So what is The Right Way? (If only we could get a tortoise to write this!) Frequent checking before, during, and after hibernation is the key.

There are many things we can and must do to try and assure a successful hibernation for our beloved desert tortoises. The following ideas are from veterinarians and experienced desert tortoise caregivers.

Remember – hibernation is a real stress on the animal, and you must monitor the process carefully. Frequent checking!

WELLNESS:

Before Hibernation:

The first consideration for hibernation is that the animal should be in good health & heavy, etc. before being allowed to go down – a vet check is always a good idea. Getting a fecal sample tested by the vet is advised, and a pre-hibernation annual checkup for a tortoise is the ideal.

- **DO NOT hibernate a tortoise that has had a serious illness during the season. His immune system will not be very efficient while it he hibernating, and infections conquered during the summer could recur.**
- **DO make sure his bowel is empty – no food for about two weeks. Soaking helps.**
- **DO check inside your tortoise’s mouth before hibernation, for grasses and**

remaining food debris. Rotting vegetation is a major cause of mouth infection during hibernation.

- **DO keep accurate records of the tortoise’s weight before, during and after hibernation.**

During Hibernation:

Check the animal at least twice a week to see if the respiration is clear - get close to the animal, touch the rear feet, listen for congestion when he pulls his head in – if congested, get him up, heat him up, feed, water, etc. and his hibernation period is OVER.

If the tortoise becomes restless during hibernation, it may be a good idea to get him up and have him checked – hibernation is a stress on the animal and he can become ill during hibernation even if he seemed OK prior. A vet visit is suggested here.

Crazy weather patterns such as warm/cool/warm/etc. make it very difficult for the animal. **Don’t try to force hibernations on the animal – he must be either – COOL & HIBERNATING – or – WARM & EATING – never in between.**

When in doubt, it is always safer to keep the animal up and warm and eating. Also, a tortoise doesn’t have to hibernate for 4 months. If you are concerned – let him hibernate, but shorten the period. This decision may best be addressed by a vet who has firsthand knowledge of your animal’s health.

HATCHLING TORTOISES:

It is commonly recommended that hatchlings should NOT hibernate until they are five years old because of their smaller size (less fat storage capacity) and that their hibernation period should be much shorter than that of adults, i.e. not longer than eight weeks.

TEMPERATURE:

Our care sheet suggests a temperature of 55 degrees Fahrenheit. The most important point is that the animals should NOT warm up during the day and cool down at night, e.g. in a south-facing garage. A STEADY temperature is important.

- DO use an accurate thermometer to check temperatures near the hibernating box during the winter.
- DO be ready to move the tortoise's box to a different location should the temperature fall too low or get too high.

LOCATION:

We always recommend bringing animals in vs. letting them dig a burrow for hibernation in SD County for obvious reasons. Vets do recommend soaking them during hibernation every other week or once a month - lukewarm water - watched carefully to avoid drowning. [When someone has had a tortoise for many years, and it has hibernated successfully in some other way, we usually say, "Don't change anything!"]

- DO cover the tortoise with sheets of newspaper. Newspaper underneath him also. No lid needed.
- DON'T use a garage or outbuilding that may be accessible to rats.
- DON'T place hibernation box more than 6 inches off the ground.

SOAKING:

Before Hibernation:

Animals should be soaked well - it is important that the gut not be full of food - if the tortoise continues to eat, obviously he's not ready for hibernation. Not eating for a couple of weeks prior to hibernation is essential to clear the gut.

- DO soak your tortoise before hibernation to ensure he is empty of food and is well hydrated before going down. This could mean the difference between life and death.

During Hibernation:

Every two to four weeks soak the tortoise in water barely warmer than he is for 20 - 30 minutes. Watch carefully to make sure his face is out of the water. The water must be deep enough to cover his tail. Dry him off completely and place him back in the hibernation box between dry newspapers.

- DON'T feed your tortoise and return him to hibernation should he awaken during the winter. Once he is up and feeding, he should stay up.
- DO check for signs of urination toward the end of the hibernation period. If he has lost fluid during a warm spell, then it is time to remove him from hibernation.
- DON'T leave your tortoise in hibernation after April Fools Day. Hibernating after that time might signal serious trouble.

After Hibernation:

After hibernation, a good soak in warm water is needed. Then the recommended regimen of weekly soaking should be resumed. (See the care sheet.)

Again, my feeling is that these guys know what to do in the wild and they handle the whole process a great deal better than we are able to. Many people have had their tortoises DIE during hibernation, so remember -----

CHECK ANIMALS FREQUENTLY DURING HIBERNATION!!!!!!

Written by the adoption committee with comments by Jeanie Anderson. Some bulleted excerpts from: *18 Essential Hibernation Hints* by Jill Martin of the Tortoise Trust.

If you need any additional information, please give us a call at 619 593-2123
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