

## Care of the California Desert Tortoise in San Diego

### SAN DIEGO TURTLE & TORTOISE SOCIETY

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DIET - 90% pasture or lawn grasses, flowers (roses, hibiscus, nasturtium, etc.) and weeds (dandelion greens especially). Tortoises normally graze on vegetation in the desert. A similar diet allowing the tortoise to graze on lawn grasses is healthiest. The diet can be supplemented with vegetables and fruits. Powdered calcium from tablets or cuttlebones is also a good addition. Many tortoises are harmed by diets which are high in water, protein or fat content and can develop bladder stones or bone disease. Tortoises soak in and drink water when it rains in the desert. It is a good idea to provide a large, shallow water dish for your tortoise to sit in occasionally.

ENCLOSURE -An escape-proof, solid fence that does not allow the tortoise to dig under, see through or climb out. There should be a barrier across the bottom 18" of any gate to prevent escape when the gate is open. The area should be large and well planted with grass, weeds, native bushes and non-poisonous plants. The tortoise needs access to shelter and shade, as well as a place to bask in the sun.

SHELTER - It is too damp in our area for tortoises to be allowed to dig burrows for shelter, as they do in the wild. The exposure to the humidity will eventually make them ill. We recommend an outside house, such as a doghouse, where the tortoise can come and go at will. The house can be heated during the day, or a 25 watt bulb could be left on to burn out any humidity. You can also bring the tortoise inside each evening and take him out in the morning.

HIBERNATION - Tortoises need a dry place to hibernate for three to five months during the winter. The optimum temperature for hibernation is a constant 55 to 60 degrees. A cardboard box with shredded newspaper in a cool closet works well. Tortoises allowed to hibernate in underground burrows in San Diego often get sick due to the humidity. Tortoises, hibernating in uninsulated outdoor houses or garages, are exposed to temperatures which fluctuate and can be too cool, or too warm, causing stress to the animal.

SAFETY - Tortoises should have no access to swimming pools, spas or ponds. They need protection from most dogs, raccoons, ravens and other animals. Other hazards can include poisonous plants, stairs, equipment, and storage areas.

HEALTH - We recommend that you quarantine your new tortoise for a short period unless this is the first tortoise to occupy your yard. Turtles and tortoises should be contained separately because they have different habitats and eating habits. Many tortoises experience stress and can develop a runny nose. Usually this will clear up in a few days if the tortoise is kept warm and quiet. If the runny nose is persistent or turns into wheezing, coughing or other medical problems, the tortoise will probably need antibiotics, which can be given orally.

ADOPTIONS - California Desert Tortoises are a threatened species in the wild. It is illegal to own one without a permit or to return one to the wild. The San Diego Turtle and Tortoise Society often has desert tortoises available for adoption to homes which can meet the requirements listed above.

COMMITMENT - Tortoises can live well beyond one hundred years. If you adopt a tortoise, you need to make arrangements to return the tortoise to the Society if you move out of the area or cannot continue to care for the tortoise.

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