

SAN DIEGO TURTLE & TORTOISE SOCIETY DESERT TORTOISE CARE SHEET

DIET - Tortoises normally graze on vegetation in the desert so a similar diet allowing the tortoise to graze on lawn grasses is healthiest. Your enclosure should consist of 90% pasture or lawn grasses and weeds (dandelion greens preferably) with availability to flowers (roses, hibiscus, nasturtium, etc.) grape vines, mulberry leaves, and succulents. Tortoises love to eat most things "red", as in bell peppers, watermelon, flowers, tomatoes, etc. The diet can be occasionally supplemented with leafy vegetables but avoid kale, spinach, and broccoli as they tend to bind the calcium in the tortoise's digestive system. Fruit should only be offered as a special treat and no more than once or twice a month. Powdered calcium and/or cuttlebones are a good addition for growing tortoises. Diets which are high in water, protein or fat content can cause bladder stones and bone disease. It's essential to provide a large, shallow water dish for your tortoise to soak in at their leisure as they would in the desert after the rain.

ENCLOSURE - Provide an escape-proof, solid border that does not allow the tortoise to dig under, see through or climb out. There should be an 18" barrier across the bottom of any gate/opening to prevent escape if the gate is accidentally left open. The enclosure should be a minimum 15'x15' and planted with grass, succulents, 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. If possible consider facing the tortoise house opening to the east so they can enjoy the morning rays.

SHELTER - Tortoises usually dig burrows for shelter in the wild. If allowed to do so in your yard, be diligent about covering the entire upper, exposed area with a tarp or other waterproof material to avoid the accumulation of excessive moisture. Continued exposure to too much humidity will eventually create respiratory problems. Outside housing is a must and should be approximately 3'x3'x2' with a hinged roof and a door that can be latched at night to protect against predators (raccoons). The tortoise is most content when he/she can come and go at will. In humid conditions the house can be heated with a 25 watt bulb to burn out moisture.

HIBERNATION - Desert tortoises should always be allowed to hibernate. It's in their genetic makeup and is important for their overall well being. They need a quiet, dry place to hibernate for three to five months during the winter, usually November through March. The optimum temperature for hibernation is a constant 40 to 55 degrees. A rodent proof, water proof plastic tub with small holes on the sides, placed inside the tortoise house in the coolest area of your yard works well but a cardboard box with shredded newspaper in a cool closet will suffice. It's not advisable for tortoises to hibernate in underground burrows in San Diego as they often get sick due to the humidity. If temperatures fluctuate too drastically during hibernation it can stress the animal.

SAFETY - Tortoises should not have access to swimming pools, spas or ponds. They need protection from overly curious dogs, coyotes, raccoons, ravens and other predators. Additional hazards can include poisonous plants, chemically fertilized plants and grasses, stairs, equipment, and storage areas. A poison plant list is provided on our website.

HEALTH - All turtles and tortoises should be kept outside. 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 species should be contained separately since they have different habitats and eating requirements. Tortoises do not need a companion! They are happiest when allowed to be the sole occupant in their habitat as they are in the wild. When stressed, tortoises can develop a runny nose and watery eyes. Usually this will clear up in a few days if the tortoise is kept warm and quiet. Squirting saline solution into their nostrils once daily for a few days is often effective. If the runny nose is persistent or turns into wheezing, coughing or other medical problems, the tortoise should be seen by a veterinarian. A list of vets specializing in tortoise care is available on our website.

ADOPTIONS - California Desert Tortoises are a threatened species in the wild although prolific in captivity. It is illegal to own one without a permit, remove them from the desert or return a captive tortoise to the wild. The San Diego Turtle and Tortoise Society, and most other tortoise rescue groups, always have desert tortoises available for adoption to homes which can meet the requirements listed above. Permits can be obtained from the Fish and Wildlife's website.

COMMITMENT - Tortoises usually live 60-100 years. If you adopt a tortoise, please make arrangements to return the tortoise to the Society if you move out of the area or cannot continue to care for the tortoise.