

# Pet Tortoises

*Testudo spp.*

An  
Introductory  
Information Leaflet  
from

in association with



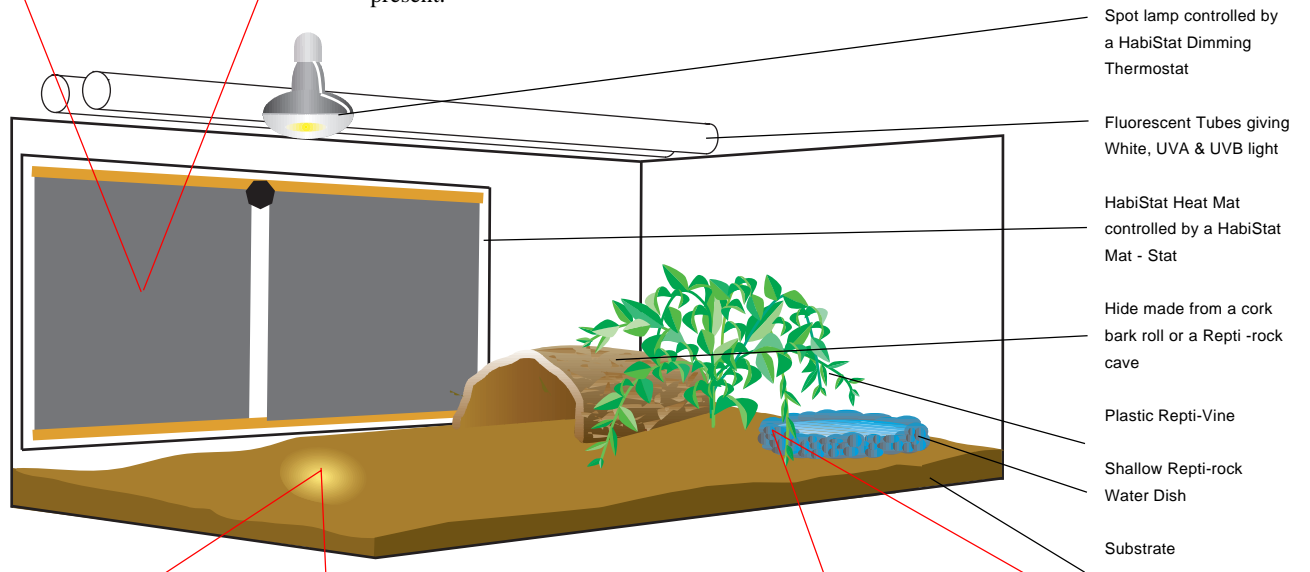
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**Background Heat**  
Use a heat mat between half and two thirds the size of the cage to provide background heating. The hottest spot in the cage should not be above 40°C while the coolest should not be below 20°C. Use a HabiStat Mat - Stat if the temperature is too hot but put the whole cage in a cooler place if the temperature is not cool enough.

**Light:** Tortoises need a source of vitamin D<sub>3</sub> and calcium to remain healthy. The more natural way is to allow UV light to synthesise the vitamin in the skin. Natural sunlight or a lamp like a *Reptile D<sub>3</sub>* or a *Blacklight* will be needed. Allow the tortoise to bask directly underneath these tubes, which should be no more than 30 cm away. The tube should also be renewed every year. Otherwise, make sure the food has an adequate amount. Calcium must be eaten but can only be absorbed from the gut if vitamin D<sub>3</sub> is present.

**Cleanliness and Hygiene:** A routine cleaner for all non-porous surfaces could be *Vetaclene*. Anything that cannot be easily cleaned should be thrown away and replaced. Any little graze or blemish on the animals themselves would benefit from the first aid afforded by dabbing the wound with *Vetadine*. As far as human hygiene is concerned, *Vetasept Surgical Scrub* will clean hands and surfaces while *Vetasept Hand Rub* will allow adequate cleansing and disinfection even in cases when water is unavailable.



### A Cage Suitable for Tortoises

**Hot Spot**  
A local area of higher temperature can be created with a hot rock, a spot lamp or a ceramic heater. Use the latter two in conjunction with a HabiStat thermostat for precise control. Hot spots should be maintained for the same day length as the lights, sixteen hours in summer, eight in winter.

**Cage Decor:** *Desert, Savannah, Rain Forest Substrates* or *Repti-Sand*, may all be used as the cage base. These will blot up and 'clump' any fouling by the tortoises. Clumps of waste can be removed without cleaning the whole tank out. *Cork Bark Logs* or *Curio Wood* could be used to make an interesting three dimensional display. *Flake Rain Forest Substrate* scattered over the surface makes for an attractive display and acts as an activity medium in which the tortoises can climb. Draping *Repti-Vines* in the cage will provide refuges the tortoises can hide in or move through but make sure the tortoise does not attempt to eat them!

**Cage Set Up**  
The cage should be set up to allow an active tortoise plenty of scope to climb, bask in a hot spot, move to a cooler spot, drink and look for food. The tortoises should also be able to secrete themselves into refuges and rub themselves against something when shedding their skin.

## Shopping List

- **HabiStat, Heat Mats** (6x11/7w, 11x11/12w, 17x11/20w, 23x11/28w, 29x11/35w, 35x11/42w & 49x11/55w) & **Strips** (17x6/10w, 23x6/15w, 35x6/22w & 47x6/30w)
- **Ceramics Bulb Heaters**(60w, 100w, 150w, 250w, Reflectors & Holders)
- **Thermometers** (Alcohol, dial, minimum - maximum & electronic digital)
- **Hygrometers** (Dial & electronic digital)
- **HabiStat Thermostats** (Mat-Stat/100w, Temperature/300w, Twin/2x300, Pulse Proportional/600w, Dimming/600w & Night Time Drop Function)
- **Repti-rock Dishes Hides & Caves** or **HabiStat Water Dishes & Hides**
- **Repti-Vines**
- **Desert Substrate**
- **Rain Forest Substrate**
- **Savannah Substrate**
- **Cork Bark**
- **Curio Wood**
- **Reptile D<sub>3</sub> Lights** (18"/15w & 24"/20w)
- **Blacklights** (18"/15w & 24"/20w)
- **Activa Professional Lights** (18"/15w & 24"/18w)
- **Arcadia Control Units** (15w, 2x15w, 18w, 2x18w, 20w & 2x20w)
- **Frozen Mouse 'Pinkies'**  
**Frozen Prepared Tortoise Diet**  
**Dried Bearded Gragon Diet**
- **Crickets**  
&/or **Locusts**  
&/or **Mealworms**  
**Waxworms**
- **Mealworm Diet Plus**  
**Cricket Diet Plus**
- **Reptasol**
- **ProBalance**
- **Vetaclean**  
**Vetadine**
- **Vetasept Surgical Scrub**  
**Vetasept Hand Rub**
- **Books & Leaflets**

## Care Outside in the Garden

During the warmer summer months, tortoises can be kept in an outside pen. How long they spend outside depends upon size and species. Mediterranean species and larger individuals of more tropical species will benefit from most warm sunny days. Small specimens should only be put out in really warm weather. They will always require some shade and should be put somewhere they are protected from predators like domestic pets and marauding birds. If confined to a pen, the walls of which should be solid as most tortoises will rub up against a wire fence. Tortoises kept outside greatly benefit from natural sunlight and if allowed, from browsing a variety of food material.

## Tortoises...

### ...Biology

Tortoises come from warm habitats from Mediterranean and steppe climates, through deserts and prairies and into the tropical rain forests. Most people associate tortoises with dryer habitats but some species come from quite humid environs. Their diet is mainly plant material but almost all will take food of animal origins on occasion. Most of the animals offered as pets will be captive bred and are usually sold as juveniles.

### ...Housing

Tortoises are best housed in as large a cage as possible. As this will take into account their rapid rate of growth. The cage should be set up in a manner similar to the diagram overleaf. It may be necessary to provide a local hot spot near 35°C, while the coolest part of the cage should be nearer 25°C. The hot spot should only operate during the day and the heat source should be screened, perhaps by the lid ventilation, to protect anything from burning. White and UV light may both be needed and should be present for a similar period; about fourteen hours per day in summer dropping to ten in winter.

Much of the success achieved in keeping tortoises will come from the skilful manipulation of ventilation. Most tortoises require lowish humidity and cannot stand stagnant air conditions. Fresh air moving into the cage is essential. Use the upward draughts caused by heated air rising to flush out the cage and drag fresh air in. A light misting with a hand sprayer will provide any humidity required.

### ...Husbandry

Tortoises may be kept singly or in groups. Of course the more tortoises kept in each cage, the larger the cage should be. As a minimum, a three foot cage should be used to house a juvenile. Larger cages are needed as the animal grows especially for the larger species. Mature males tend to fight and if more than one is present in the cage and there should be plenty of retreats and visual screens.

To handle a tortoise, the whole animal should be gently grasped and held in the hands. One hand beneath, supporting and the other grasping the animal's shell, controlling it. These animals just about tolerate being handle.

In time the cage will begin to look scruffy as faeces and debris builds up. As everything recommended for the cage is washable or disposable, a good clean out is easily done. Five to six weeks would be about as long as the cage could be left before being completely cleaned. The cage set up advised in this leaflet is practicable and can be made to look pleasing to the eye. If a more natural set up is envisaged, it may be best to wait until some experience is gained. In any case, some of the very informative books on keeping reptiles in general and tortoises in particular could be investigated.

### ...Food & Feeding

Leafy vegetables like cabbage, form the staple diet in captivity. Other green vegetables to try might include spinach, kale and broccoli. To bulk out the food grated root vegetables are often used and these could include items like carrot and swede. A

lesser proportion of the diet, say 25%, could be made up with fruit and salad items. These, whilst relished, probably cost more than they are worth and are a bit short on the coarse fiber that is essential. Any diet needs to be supplemented with vitamins and minerals. Dusting the food with *Reptavite* two or three times per week would normally be sufficient. If an individual animal is showing signs of bone or shell disease, such as softness or distortion, a more potent supplement is advised. For such short term treatment, *Repton* is the preferred supplement but do not use it continuously over a long period. Most tortoises will require a bulk source of calcium and will accept such items as baked egg shells and cuttlefish bone. Occasionally some individuals will eat food of animal origin and such things as dog and cat food have been taken. One or two small meals per month would seem to do no harm but neither does omitting this type of food all together.

Food is only eaten if the tortoise is warm enough and not distracted with other activities. Feed the tortoises every day with as much fresh food as it will eat. It is not usually possible to overfeed a tortoise on fresh leafy food. If more concentrated food is offered, such as commercial diets, bulky carbohydrate rich items or dog or cat food, controlled amounts should be offered.

A small water dish kept full of fresh water should always be available. The tortoises may take an occasional drink from this but most of the moisture is obtained directly from the food. An occasional bath in a large shallow dish may be appreciated by some individuals.

### ...Reproduction

Male tortoises have a more concave plastron or lower shell, while in the females, it is almost flat. The male's tail is slightly longer and the vent opens near the middle rather than at the base, which is the case in females.

A period of courtship proceeds mating and during this time much activity can be expected. Eggs are laid after mating and they may take several weeks to hatch. To grow to adult in captivity may take as short a time as four or five years but in the wild, six to ten years may elapse. A cooler winter period will be needed to condition the tortoises for breeding in the following season. The tortoises available as pets are usually captive bred. In their native habitats they are still relatively common but European regulations prevent them from being imported from the wild.

### ...Health & Disease

Tortoises live for many years in the wild but seem to live even longer in captivity. They do not suffer from many diseases and veterinary attention is rarely needed. An environment and diet as described in this leaflet will preclude most problems. The most often encountered disease will be a metabolic bone disorder caused by insufficient vitamin D<sub>3</sub> or calcium. Good practice, hygiene and first aid will probably deal with rest. If real disease is discovered, a vet must of course, be consulted. Pet tortoises do not pose a real threat to human health. All the normal hygiene precautions regarding humans and animals should, however, be observed.