

Captive Care of the Desert Tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii*

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Housing

- Tortoises should be housed in outdoor enclosures whenever possible.
- A backyard or enclosed area of the yard works well.
- Make sure the enclosure is escape proof by digging a barrier structure deep into the ground along the perimeter of the enclosure or by placing a layer of sheet metal bent at a 90° angle inward under ground level.
- The enclosure can be landscaped with nutritious vegetation.
- Do not allow tortoises to inhabit the same yard with dogs. Dogs will often chew on tortoises.
- Burrows can be constructed in many ways. A 0.5 - 1.5 m (2 - 4 ft) deep burrow can be dug into the ground, the side of a sloping area of the enclosure, or built upward from ground level. The sides can be lined with bricks for support. The top can be covered with wood or other materials and covered with plastic. The structure should then be covered with enough soil, 30 cm (1 ft), to provide adequate insulation from the cold winter and hot summer temperatures.
- If indoor housing is used, aquariums or plastic tubs can be used. Use an overhead lamp to provide a heat source keeping the temperatures ranging from 25 - 32° C (78 - 90° F). A gradient should exist in the cage allowing the tortoise to select warmer or cooler temperatures, as it desires. An ultraviolet light source specifically indicated for reptiles should also be placed directly over the cage. The cage should be allowed to cool at night to 20 - 24° C (68 - 75° F). Newspaper or coarse dirt can be used as cage substrate. Dirt may be an important source of bacteria needed for digestion for hatchling tortoises. A hiding box should also be provided.

Diet

- Desert tortoises are herbivorous, meaning they only eat plants. They also require large amounts of fiber in their diet for normal digestion. They should not be fed anything that is not of plant origin.
- An area of Bermuda grass should be planted within the enclosure. Bermuda grass is one of the best food items you can provide. Dichondra, dandelions, and mallows can also be planted and are a good source of nutrition.
- For tortoises housed indoors a mixture of dark leafy greens (mustards, collards, kale, spinach, escrole, parsley, and cilantro) and cut grass or grass hay should be offered daily. A small amount of other vegetables and fruits can be given on occasion.
- Water should be provided one to two times weekly in a dug out area of soil or

in a depression in the grass and allowed to dry between waterings.
Permanent water sources are not recommended.

- Commercial pelleted diets are not recommended.
- Supplementation of calcium and vitamins are not necessary for tortoises feeding on grass in outdoor enclosures. It is also not necessary for tortoises housed indoors that have access to UV light and are fed a diet that is predominantly a mixture of dark leafy greens and grass.

Hibernation

- Hibernation is very important for long-term health.
- In the desert regions of the southwestern United States, tortoises should be allowed to hibernate outside in their burrows.
- Hibernation generally ranges from October through March or April of the following year.
- If hibernating tortoises indoors, care should be taken not to allow the tortoise to be kept too warm. Tortoises should be maintained between 10 - 18°C (50 - 65°F).
- Caution should also be taken that burrows do not become wet or remain damp during hibernation.
- Tortoises hibernated indoors can become dehydrated due to the lower humidity level of the house. These tortoises should be allowed to warm to room temperature and soaked in a room temperature 18 - 24°C (65 - 75°F) water bath monthly during hibernation.

Veterinary Care

- Tortoises should be routinely examined every fall prior to hibernation.
- Microscopic evaluation of feces for parasites should also be performed annually.
- Tortoises should be examined by a veterinarian knowledgeable about reptiles if you notice nasal discharge, weight loss, diarrhea, anorexia, regurgitation, swollen eyes, soft shells, wounds, or other concerning conditions.
- Speak with your reptile veterinarian concerning *Salmonella* bacteria in reptiles and preventative measures that can be taken to limit transmission to people.