



Russian Tortoise Care

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General Information

Native Habitat: Central Asia

Scientific Name: *Testudo horsfieldii*

Lifespan: >40 years

Adult Length: 6-10"

Housing

An adult Russian tortoise can be kept in a space that is a minimum of 4 x 3 feet and 10-12 inches tall depending on the size of the tortoise. More space is always better. A variety of options from plastic bins and aquariums to custom built tortoise pens can be considered. It is important that the enclosure has good circulation and can easily be cleaned.

The bottom of the enclosure can be lined with repti-carpet, linoleum, tile, newspaper, or paper towel for easy cleanup. A portion of the enclosure should be an area where your tortoise can dig. A small box that is easy for your tortoise to get into and out of should be filled with top soil and kept slightly moistened. Be sure the soil has no fertilizer or additives. The box should be at least twice the length of your tortoise in both length and width, and should be at least 4-6" in depth. The soil should be checked frequently for mold and feces. It should be changed about every 1-2 weeks.

An area should be provided on the cool and the warm side of the enclosure where your tortoise can hide. These areas should be large enough that your tortoise can turn around in and easily get out of. Any items put in the enclosure should be easy to clean, sturdy, and not too tall in the event your tortoise tries to climb on it.

Lighting

Russian tortoises require a high output of UVB light, as well as a basking area that reaches 95-100 degrees Fahrenheit. For this reason they do well with mercury vapor bulbs. These bulbs need to be changed yearly as the UVB levels degrade even if the bulb is still bright. Be sure to closely check the temperatures before putting your tortoise in the enclosure with an infrared temperature gun or a temperature gauge with a probe that can be placed directly on the

basking site.

Their temperature gradient should be between 70-80 degrees Fahrenheit in their enclosure during the day, and can drop to 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit at night. A night bulb may be required if the temperature drops below this.

If a non-mercury vapor bulb is used, you will need to provide both a source of heat as well as a source of UVB. Heating should always be provided as a lamp/dome fixture. UVB options include compact coiled bulbs and linear fluorescent bulbs. Most UVB sources need to be changed every 6 months, even if the light is still working. The UVB bulb should be placed closest to where the tortoise spends most of its time, and should not be put behind glass or plastic. The tortoise should be able to sit within 6-12" of the UVB source and should have an inclined surface to provide a gradient of exposure.

Water

Fresh water should be provided at all times for your tortoise. Even if they are not seen drinking, it should always be offered. You can give them a dish large enough for them to soak as well as long as it is changed regularly. They will often use their water dish as a bathroom. To entice drinking and improve hydration, your tortoise can be soaked in shallow tepid water for 10-15 minutes 2-3 times a week.

Diet

Leafy greens and grasses are the staples of Russian tortoise diets. Examples of appropriate leafy greens include mustard greens, escarole, romaine lettuce, red/green leaf lettuce, turnip greens, dandelion greens and endive. Appropriate grasses include timothy, orchard and Bermuda hay. Fresh hay can be provided at all times for your tortoise.

Fresh flowers and safe plants that have not been treated with any chemicals can be offered to your tortoise as well. Some examples include Hibiscus flowers and leaves, hostas, mulberry leaves, dandelion flowers and leaves, rose flowers and leaves, and chrysanthemum flowers. Do not offer fruit as fruit has a high sugar content that can cause intestinal issues.

Calcium powder that contains no phosphorous should be used to dust the food 1-2 times weekly. A multivitamin containing Vitamin A such as Nekton-Rep can be used 1-2 times per month.

Handling

Russian tortoises are generally docile and easy to handle. Start handling your tortoise a week or two after acquiring it so that it has a chance to get used to its new home. Always keep a firm

grip on your tortoise and handle them close to the ground so they do not fall. You may bring your tortoise outside for some time in the sun but only with direct supervision. Only place them on grass that has not been treated with any chemicals in case they decide to eat any of it.

Common Health Issues

- Hypovitaminosis A: Chelonians (turtles and tortoises) are prone to hypovitaminosis A if they have a poor quality or inappropriate diet. Hypovitaminosis A often occurs when there is a lack of dark leafy greens or carotene rich foods (carrots, yams, peas) in the diet. It manifests as changes in the skin and mucous membranes. In this state they are more prone to respiratory infections and ear abscesses as the lining of these cavities are compromised. This condition is treated by adjusting the diet, treating secondary infections, supportive care and added supplementation of vitamin A.
- Respiratory Infections: Respiratory infections in turtles and tortoises are most often caused by poor husbandry. Inappropriate diet and temperatures, poor cleanliness and stress such as overcrowding are some possible causes. Chelonians with respiratory signs may have discharge from their nostrils, have an audible wheeze, have excess mucous in their mouths, and in severe cases may gape for air. These animals should be evaluated and treated by a veterinarian. Long term antibiotic treatment and supportive care are often needed in these animals.
- Intestinal parasites: A small number of these parasites may normally inhabit your reptile's gastrointestinal tract without any problems. However with overgrowth of these parasites they can cause a problem. They can cause malabsorption of nutrients, inappetence, lethargy and abnormal stool production. A few of the common parasites encountered include pinworms, coccidia, and flagellated protozoa. A fecal exam is recommended yearly for your reptile to screen for parasitic overgrowth.
- Secondary Nutritional Hyperparathyroidism: This disease process is caused by improper husbandry with some possibilities including lack of calcium or vitamin D3 in the diet, excess phosphorous in the diet and absence of a UVB light source. A majority of reptiles need calcium added to their diet in the form of a Calcium powder (no phosphorous) used to dust the insects a few times weekly. In order to process this calcium, a UVB light source is required. When there is an imbalance in the calcium and phosphorous, the body increases the breakdown of calcium stores from the animal's bones in order to maintain appropriate calcium levels. In an animal this can cause significant deformation of the skeleton including bowing of the legs, shortening of the snout, and stunting of growth. The bones become fragile and are prone to fractures. As calcium is needed for many bodily functions, such as muscle contraction, the animal may become weak, lethargic, and anorexic when the body can no longer maintain its calcium levels. This is a process that can typically be remedied with improvement in husbandry and long term calcium supplementation under veterinary supervision. In severe cases, hospitalization may be required to give the animal the best chance at recovery.