

Sulcata Tortoise

The most produced tortoises in the world are probably sulcata tortoises. As recently as a few decades ago sulcata tortoises were rare in the United States, but they have shown an amazing ability to adapt to various climates and habitats in captivity, and their low cost combined with a curious personality make them tortoises that are commonly sought after by first-time tortoise owners.

- **Common Name:** Sulcata tortoise, African spurred, African spur thigh, and just spurred tortoises
- **Scientific Name:** *Geochelone [Centrochelys] Sulcata*
- **Distribution:** North Central Africa.
- **Size:** Sulcata tortoise hatchlings measure approximately 1½ to 2 inches in carapace length. Growth rates of sulcatas are probably more variable than any other tortoise. You could literally have a 10-inch tortoise that is 3 years old or 10 years old. Many adult sulcata tortoises break the 100-pound mark. These tortoises (males especially) can reach 200 pounds. Any tortoises nearing that weight would be very old. Sulcata tortoises grow rapidly for the first 5 to 10 years, and then their growth slows with age.
- **Life Span:** Because sulcata tortoises haven't really been raised from birth for very long, it's still hard to determine what age a well-raised sulcata born into captivity is capable of living to. Raised on a lean, high-fiber diet, captive-raised animals in low-stress environments have higher life expectancies. Most indications are that sulcata tortoises can live more than 70 years.

Habitat

Because of their size, sulcata tortoises are best kept by those who have access to an outdoor area, where their tortoise(s) can be kept for most, or all, of the year in places that don't get too cold.

Sulcata tortoise enclosures require a sturdy wall at least 24-inches

in height above ground, as well as 12- to 24-inches below ground to prevent (or discourage) these tortoises from digging. Concrete masonry blocks work well when cemented in place, as well as a well-built wood wall as a barrier. See-through fences and walls shouldn't be used, as the tortoises tend to try to escape through or over these walls.

Sulcata tortoises are burrowers if there isn't a proper hide box accessible as a cool retreat during the summer months or a warm retreat during the winter. There are exceptions to every rule, though. When the tortoises make efforts to dig, these spots should be filled in with large flagstones, etc., to prevent future digging. A single tortoise can be allowed to burrow naturally, but with multiple tortoises in an enclosure, they can "stack up" in the burrows, and the deepest ones will be unable to exit.

Sulcata tortoises are grazers and will eat any grasses and most plants in their enclosure. You can plant any of the various clump grasses as well as desert-type mesquite and African sumac trees, which also make for nice cage décor. Fragile plants are likely to be destroyed by the tortoises once the animals have any size to them.

Young sulcata tortoises can be raised indoors. While outdoor housing is preferred anytime the temperatures are in the acceptable range, many people raise their sulcatas indoors for the first few years of life. The enclosure itself isn't as big of a deal as the furnishings you put into it, including substrate, lighting, temperature gradients and cage furniture. In cold climates, a suitable enclosure can be built in the garage for large tortoises that need to spend a few months indoors during the winter. These enclosures should be heated enough to keep the tortoises comfortable during the indoor months.

All of our baby sulcata tortoises raised indoors have access to a humid hiding area where they can snuggle in and get a dose of humidity, much like they would in a natural burrow. This humid

microclimate helps their shells to grow smoothly and helps in keeping the tortoise hydrated. Tortoises raised without proper humidity tend to dehydrate quickly and form “bumpy” shells as they grow.

Many different substrates can be used in indoor enclosures. For all sizes of tortoise, cypress mulch has proven to be a great bedding. It’s absorbent, safe and relatively low cost. Other options are various hays (timothy, Bermuda, alfalfa, orchard grass, etc.), as well as coconut bedding or peat moss. Outdoor enclosures don’t need fancy substrates, provided the soils that are there are mostly natural and not tainted with chemicals or fertilizers.

I also include a few large, flat rocks in an indoor enclosure. They help file down the tortoises’ nails and makes them exercise.

Heating & Lighting

Sulcata tortoises that live outdoors are tolerant to various temperature ranges. High temperatures are not going to be a problem provided the tortoise has a shaded area to escape to if desired. The tortoises themselves can handle surprisingly cold temperatures, as low as 50 degrees Fahrenheit, with no problems. When nighttime temperatures drop below 50 degrees, a heated hide box should be provided that maintains at least 65 to 70 degrees at night (even higher is better), or the tortoises should be brought in during those times. Sulcata tortoises are kept outdoors year-round in some parts of the country where nighttime lows in the winter are 40 degrees or higher. It is absolutely required that these tortoises are checked on each evening to make sure they get into a heated area and do not fall asleep out in the open and become exposed to these temperatures at night.

Indoors, sulcata tortoises can be maintained at normal room temperatures: 68 to 80 degrees. They should also have a basking area heated by an overhead light. This spot should be in the 100-degree range. Like most diurnal, herbivorous reptiles, they NEED a UVB light in their indoor enclosures to help them properly

process the calcium in their diets. Keep lights on 12 to 14 hours a day, and turn off all light and heat sources at night.

Nutrition

Sulcata tortoises are eager eaters, rarely turning down a meal. With adult tortoises, the best staple diets are various grasses and leaves, the same as their natural diet. They will graze on any of the lawn grasses, mulberry leaves, grape leaves, hibiscus leaves and flowers. With size, most sulcata tortoises will eat grass hays (we like orchard grass hay). Baby and smaller sulcatas have a harder time eating the tougher grass and hay because of their less powerful jaws.

We also use spring mixes (particularly with baby sulcata tortoises), which have several leafy ingredients in them, and we supplement with kale, collard greens, turnip greens and any of the darker lettuce types. Cactus pads can also be a major part of the diet of many tortoises as well. Pelleted tortoise diets can also occasionally be offered to cover any of the nutritional bases that the other diet may have missed. Variety is the key. Feed tortoises from a grass surface, flat rock or concrete, or from a tray. To prevent them from eating soil or rocks, never feed tortoises directly from a gravel or dirt surface

Water

Sulcata tortoises need water dishes in their enclosures. We use shallow, ramped, low-sided dishes. Cleaning must be done on a regular basis, as most tortoises tend to soak in their dishes and defecate in them. Tortoises living in areas with regular rainfall drink from puddles and leaves. If you live in areas with prolonged dry periods, offering them water helps to keep them hydrated. They need to be soaked outside the enclosure in shallow, warm water once or twice a week for 15 to 30 minutes to get fully hydrated.

Baby and juvenile sulcata tortoises tend to dry out much quicker

than larger, more established tortoises. Because of this, We soak our baby sulcata tortoises in shallow, warm water up to three times a week, for 10 to 15 minutes.

Health

These tortoises can suffer from most common reptile health problems, but respiratory infections are the most prevalent.

Sulcata tortoises can also be prone to respiratory infections if they are kept in cool or wet enclosures. They need to be able to dry out, particularly if temperatures are low.

Tortoises can hide ailments very well, so keep an eye out for cloudy eyes, breathing sounds (wheezing), and a change in appetite. These can be signs of illness and should be taken to the vet immediately because they can go downhill very quickly.

Handling and Temperament

Contrary to what many think, tortoises generally should not be handled with any regularity. They are easily stressed when overhandled, and children tend to drop them when spooked. These stress factors can lead to a decline in a tortoise's activity levels and health.

Adult sulcata tortoises are generally more resistant to handling, but all tortoises should be handled carefully. Avoid pinning them down or restricting them. Allow them to carry on in their intended way, especially when they're young. Older sulcatas are usually pretty tolerant of people.

As Always, This is only a basic care sheet,

Please continue to educate yourself on your new family member.