



Practice Limited to Birds, Reptiles and Exotics

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## ***Sulcata Tortoise Care Sheet***

*(Spur Thighed Tortoise – Geochelone sulcata)*

### **Natural History:**

Sulcata tortoises are native to more northern parts of Africa. The Sulcata is the largest of the African mainland tortoise, with specimens easily reaching 24-30 inches (60-75 cm) in carapace length and 80-110 pounds (36-50 kg).

### **Food and Feeding:**

Adults should be fed three times per week minimum, and hatchlings fed daily. For every feeding, dust food with a calcium supplement. Every 2 to 4 weeks, dust food with multivitamins. Chop and mix two or three types of dark leafy greens, some thawed frozen mixed vegetables, sprouts, and whatever other vegetables are available. Before feeding, add freshly chopped fruits and occasionally (not more than twice a month) some high-protein foods. **Feed as much variety as possible!**

**95% Vegetables.** Most vegetables should be dark leafy greens (mustard, collard, radish and turnip greens or tops, kale, cabbage), dandelions, bok-choy, broccoli rape or rapina, backyard grasses (especially Bermuda and timothy grass), clovers, legumes, and weeds (freshly cut or as browse). Feed less spinach, Swiss chard, beet greens, red leaf or romaine lettuce. Timothy hay is an excellent source of fiber.

The following may be given in moderation : Soaked alfalfa pellets, thawed frozen mixed vegetables (peas, corn, carrots, green and lima beans), peas in the pod, cauliflower, green beans, alfalfa, clover, radish, or soy bean sprouts, jicama, greens peppers, radishes, summer and winter squashes, and prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia* spp.) pads (shave off spines).

**<5% Fruits.** Grapes, apples, bananas with skin, oranges, pears, prickly pear fruit, peaches, plums, nectarines, dates, all types of melons, strawberries, raspberries, mangos, peaches and apricots (no pits), figs, oranges, and tomatoes.

**O to 5% High-protein foods.** Some genera of Sulcatas - Kinixys, Chersina, and Manouria, are more omnivorous and may benefit from small amounts of high-protein foods. Generally these foods are limited to once every 2 weeks in small amounts. The above species of tortoises may eat dry, maintenance low-fat dog food, commercial tortoise chows, whole or baby mice. Dry chows should be soaked in lukewarm water until slightly soft. **High-protein foods are widely assumed to promote rapid growth in young tortoises, which may result in an abnormal shell growth condition called 'Pyramiding'.**

### **Vitamin Supplements:**

Routinely supplement your tortoise diets with both a multivitamin supplement and a calcium supplement. Regular supplementation will help even out any inconsistencies and trace element deficiencies in their diet.

### **Housing:**

Daytime temperatures during much of the year should range from 85-105 F (29-40 C) during the day. At night, temperatures can drop into the 70s F (21-26 C) in their enclosure. They must be dry. Provisions must be made to house them indoors during rainy weather and in places where the nights are cold and/or damp.

### **Indoors:**

Given the tremendous amount of room these tortoises need to roam, maintaining them inside year round is not advised. Temporary indoor housing, as for hatchlings, sick individuals or during inclement weather, can be set up. It must include both basking and cooler retreat areas. An area for feeding and a shallow water dish must also be provided. **Ultraviolet B lighting**

**must be provided** as well as suitable temperature ranges during both the day (80 F (27 C) with a basking area (100 F (39C)) and night (72 F (22 C)).

### **Outdoors:**

Sulcatas can be housed outdoors only if they are provided dry, heated housing into which they will retire at night and during inclement weather.

A dog house or a trashcan laid on its side make suitable houses. They must be raised up off the ground and supplied with heat during colder weather. A wide ramp must be constructed for them to move easily in and out. Make a curtain to cover the opening; a couple of layers of plastic drop cloth, cut into 2-3 inch wide strips, will create a curtain that can easily be pushed through but will keep out draughts. Red lights or ceramic heating elements suspended from the ceiling of the house and safely out of reach of the tortoise, may be used during cool weather. A pig blanket or fresh mounds of alfalfa hay or grasses can be used inside on the floor. Check regularly and replace as necessary.

A shallow water bowl, with sides low enough for the tortoise to reach into, should be available at all times. You need to make sure they can easily access the water but that it is not any deeper than their chin when head is partially retracted.

### **Behavior:**

Sulcatas like to move around and are very strong -- they must have a large area in which to freely and widely roam. They are also climbers. Care must be taken to assure they are not given the opportunity to climb things that are too steep resulting in their toppling over. If they flip onto their backs and are not able to right themselves, they may suffocate. Sulcatas also need to burrow away from the heat and do so by retreating to the shade or into muddy wallows. When temperatures exceed 104 F (40 C), they will begin to salivate, smearing saliva on their forearms to help cool themselves down.

### **Health Problems:**

Two common diet-related health problems easily observable are shell softening (calcium deficiency or excessive phosphorous) and pyramiding (generally associated with too much protein). If either of these conditions manifests itself, an immediate reassessment of the diet needs to be done. A visit to the veterinarian for blood sampling is highly advised.

High levels of dietary protein may also cause increased uric acid in the bladder and may result in death. In severe cases, the normally gelatinous urates (the white and fluid material which is voided out during defecation) becomes solid and may become impacted. Moderate cases may be taken off protein and soaked frequently to increase the volume of water in the body to help thin the urates. In extreme cases, surgery may be required to remove impacted urates.

Sulcatas are prone to respiratory infections. Symptoms include nasal discharge, watery eyes (occurs in cold weather only), loss of appetite, and lethargy. The animal will generally require hospitalization with treatment including antibiotics, a heated environment and fluid therapy. Severe cases may require forced-feeding.

Sulcatas regularly ingest their own and other animal feces. Fecal samples should be regularly tested to assure they are free from bacterial, protozoan and worm infestations.

### **Hatchlings:**

Hatchlings may be maintained indoors in aquariums. Substrates such as alfalfa hay or pellets, may be used. The temperature should range from 85-95 F. In addition, a heat lamp to provide a focal basking spot with a 105-110 (40-43 C) basking surface temperature should be provided. Hatchlings must be given 10-12 hours a day exposure to UVB-producing fluorescent lights.

Food selection of hatchlings tend towards more succulent plants; offer dark greens such as collards, alfalfa, kale, dandelion, grasses. No animal protein needs to be given, as this may cause growth abnormalities and health problems.

Vitamin supplements, both a multivitamin and a calcium supplement, may be added to their food.

Twice weekly, hatchlings housed in enclosures should be soaked in shallow tepid water, which helps to stimulate elimination.

Advised reading: [www.chelonian.org](http://www.chelonian.org).....[www.tortoise.org](http://www.tortoise.org).

For information regarding toxic plants: [www.tortoise.org/general/poisonp.html](http://www.tortoise.org/general/poisonp.html)

***We strongly recommend annual health examinations on all exotics!***

