

Care sheets

Who Knows Best Anyway???

The purpose of creating these care sheets is to offer our opinions and experiences based on what has worked for us over the last almost 30 years here at Prairie Hills Tortoises. There are many care sheets written by many tortoise keepers and we recommend that you read as many as you can find and take away the information that feels right for you. You may read information that you just do not agree with and that is fine, providing the tortoises in your care are healthy and thriving with their specific needs met- all is good. We ourselves are open minded to new research and information and personally we never stop learning about these amazing animals.

Some species care and diet are remarkably alike such as Hermann and Russian Tortoises, so I will combine these and add any specific notes that apply to the one species.

DIET

You will find that dietary advice is very contradictory, and folks form their opinions on the '*Right Diet*' Now in an ideal world these tortoises would be fed a completely natural diet comprising of the plants grown on different nutrient rich soils that they would find in their native habitats but realistically in captivity taking into consideration climate, growing season growing zones, choice available in one's grocery stores and such we can find ourselves somewhat limited. **Variety is the spice of life and no truer words spoken for an ideal tortoise diet!** Luckily in a less than ideal world we have available some dry foods that can be added to the lesser nutritious foods bumping up the nutritional values and getting closer to the correct nutritional content. There are some respected commercial foods available that can be kept on hand throughout the winter months and used as a supplementary diet. We personally use Mazuri regular tortoise food plus the higher fibre LS Mazuri, Zoo meds Grassland foods, Zoo meds forest foods. We also use a product called Tortoise Nutrition Powder from Carolina Pet supplies which contains a large percentage of dried cacti plus healthy botanicals. **Remember access to clean water is essential for all species.**

We use both calcium with Vitamin D added occasionally in winter and lots of calcium carbonate/ limestone flour year-round in dishes available for self feeding. Cuttle bone is readily available too-for babies use a potato peeler or sharp knife to shave off a few shards for them.

We make our own calcium blocks too, add water to calcium carbonate and mix, pour into muffin pans and allow to dry for a few days until firm-easy!

Also available are dried plants and blooms such as nopal cacti, moringa, red clover, calendula, hibiscus, mulberry, cornflowers, roses, dandelions, plantain and many more. If like many folks you need to rely on some grocery store foods for at least some of the year you can try misting the foods with water and adding dry matter foods to it to increase nutrition and variety. If you have time and inclination you can

dry extra weeds and blooms in summer for winter use-a dehydrator is quick but sun drying does the job too.

We also rehydrate hay cubes and offer to all species to add extra much needed fibre to their diets.

If you like to grow plants then you can have a lot of fun growing suitable houseplants, greens, annuals or just try some oat, wheat, barley, rye grass seed in a tray of soil and snip off the juicy shoots with scissors and you will get a few crops before the seed is tired.

Summers in Canada are fantastic for tortoises, UVB from the best source the sun, time outdoors grazing and best of all **-WEEDS!** And fresh grown fruits etc.

I have made a list of some suitable diets to get you started BUT please research more as there are numerous lists of suitable plants on the internet showing safe and readily available plants that are highly nutritious and often growing in our own homes or gardens or at least close by.

Remember however if you forage elsewhere for plants be sure to check if the plants have not been sprayed with pesticides and such. Most people are delighted to have you remove the weeds from their yards.

LIGHTING

Another debatable topic is lighting and of course as time goes on new products are available replacing older methods and the like. We keep this simple as we find our choices to be highly effective in raising happy tortoises. Basically, tortoises need heat and UV, and we use a couple of options here.

Our suggestions are:

1. MVB bulbs that produce both Heat and UV in the one, self ballasted bulb. Be sure to buy a holder with a ceramic fitting and not a plastic one as these bulbs get extremely hot.

Typically, they are supposed to be effective in terms of their UV output for approximately 6 mths brands do vary and we use a solar meter to check how they are performing. They need to be around 12 inches from the tortoise no closer.

2. A T5 High output **long fluorescent (*not compact)** reptile bulb in their correct light fixture-This is your UV source only as they give off little heat. They last (effective UV levels) around 12 mths and come in many lengths ranging from around 12 inches up to 48 inches. The bulb you use does need to be specific to reptiles, as grow lights that typically come with these fittings are designed for plant growth and not reptile health.

(Feel free to use grow lights in set ups too in addition to the reptile bulbs if you are hoping to have plants thriving in there.)

***WE DO NOT RECOMMEND ANY FORM OF COMPACT FLUORESCENT UV BULB AS THEY HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO DAMAGE EYES OR EVEN BLIND TORTOISES**

Heat bulbs-there are many options-we tend to use floodlights and halogen bulbs from hardware stores, but you can also use a basking bulb from a pet supply store-all these options work equally well for heat.

ENCLOSURE

There are Lots of options for enclosures. We grew up in England where tortoises were generally set up in a closed style vivarium, but here in Canada and generally in North America folks tend to adopt the tortoise table style. Having used both types we tend to build tortoise table set ups for all our own tortoises here at Prairie Hills Tortoises. If you google 'Tortoise table' you will get many ideas and you can choose a simple set up or be as creative as you wish providing you meet their basic needs.

Babies, we start off in long under bed plastic storage boxes-these are inexpensive and offer you many months of time to design and create their bigger permanent set up.

For our breeding groups we typically build an 8ft by 4 ft wooden box-we waterproof the wood with waterproofing products, more recently using 2-part clear epoxy and it is proving to work very well for us.

Hides can be added, and you can simply use half terracotta pots or black plastic plant pots etc. We have even made our own from Styrofoam and covered with concrete, painted, and sealed. Ceramic or slate tiles make great feeding spots and can help keep beaks and nails short. Water bowls of appropriate sizes must be used-remembering that babies need a shallow dish, so they are not at risks from flipping and drowning. We have small glass ash trays, small up to large terracotta dishes for examples. Some species are excellent at muddying their water bowl or worse, but all tortoise species need access to fresh drinking water.

Some people use fake greenery for esthetics we like to add live plants but be aware that the tortoise may knock over plants and try eating them so choose heavy pots and edible plants.

SUBSTRATES

Provide a natural base for your tortoise giving both a natural environment with traction and security. We choose to use Coconut coir both the fine and chunky types as we can buy it locally. Others use cypress mulch, Repti-bark etc. Some people mix soil and sand together too. Just ensure that food offered is on a clean surface so that ingestion of substrate is not a problem.

Within the hides for all species, we like to use some moss such as sphagnum moss that you can moisten to create a humid resting place. The humid hides help to keep the tortoise hydrated and thus encourages smooth shell growth.

OUTDOORS

We feel it is essential that your tortoise gets some sunlight to provide the most natural form of UV available. It is also greatly beneficial for your tortoise to have access to natural grazing and a new environment to explore in good weather. Ensure that your tortoise is safe from predators including your environment to explore. Be sure to protect from the family dog, cat etc. plus wildlife. Provide hides and cool retreats plus access to water so that they do not overheat and keep an eye on temperatures, so they are protected from extremes. Babies are vulnerable to overheating and becoming too cold very quickly-they do not need to be outdoors for long periods of time.

Some species such as the Russian Tortoise are excellent at excavating and will easily disappear underground if not checked on regularly. We dug down into the soil with fence material to help combat this problem.