



SULCATA STATION

Sulcata 101: Basic Care Information

The first thing you should understand about your sulcata tortoise is that it WILL get BIG!

The second thing you should understand is that this will happen much sooner than you anticipate!

Although sulcata hatchlings are cute and tiny and will easily fit in the palm of your hand, they **will** get big. Sulcata are the third largest species of tortoises in the world. Only Galapagos and Aldabra tortoises – the giant tortoises you typically see in zoos -- get bigger.

You can expect your sulcata tortoise to easily reach 18 inches (45 cm) in shell length, and 70 to 100 pounds (30 to 45 kg) in weight. Some tortoises do get even larger: If your tortoise turns out to be the chelonian equivalent of Shaquille O'Neal, it might reach 24 to 30 inches (60 to 76 cm) in shell length, and around 150 lbs. (68 kg) in weight!

Sulcata tortoises also grow very quickly. As a desert species, they have evolved to deal with sparse and sporadic food supplies. In captivity, as a response to regular food supplies, sulcata tend to grow very quickly, so that **they reach adult size in five to ten years**, rather than the 20 to 50 years that would be typical in the wild. This fact catches many new owners off-guard, since pet store employees almost always tell potential buyers that “the tortoise won’t get big for years!”

Species Name

New owners often (and erroneously) refer to these tortoises as “African Spur-Thighed Tortoises.” This can create a lot of confusion with a completely different tortoise species from the Mediterranean area. Experienced owners tend to avoid this confusion by referring to their tortoises as “sulcata tortoises,” based on the correct scientific name (*Geochelone sulcata*). That's why we use the term “sulcata tortoises” throughout this website.

[The “true” spur-thighed tortoises originate in the areas around the Mediterranean Sea and belong to a completely different complex of tortoises. They also require completely different care than sulcata tortoises. The scientific name for the whole complex (or Genus) of Mediterranean-area spur-thighed tortoises is *Testudo*. There are various species within the *Testudo* genus. The most commonly available ones in pet stores are *Testudo graeca*, *Testudo hermanni*, *Testudo ibera*, and *Testudo kleinmanni*. These are all commonly referred to as “Mediterranean Spur-Thighed tortoises.”]

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Housing and Heating Requirements

Sulcata tortoises are native to the semi-arid Sahel region in Africa (loosely defined as the region just south of the Sahara Desert). They have evolved to deal with a warm, dry environment with lots of natural sunlight, so their habitat in your home or yard should be set up with this fact in mind.

You need to provide your tortoise with daytime temperatures between approximately 75 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit (23 to 29 degrees Celsius). **DO NOT keep the tortoise's enclosure warmer than this -- no matter what the pet store may tell you!** People mistakenly assume that sulcata tortoises must be kept at high temperatures because they are desert animals. This is NOT true! When the temperature goes above 85 degrees F, sulcata tortoises will seek shelter from the heat in their underground burrows, and they will stay underground until temperatures drop to tolerable levels. Wild tortoises stay out of the mid-day sun and heat, only coming above-ground to eat and drink early in the morning or early in the evening after temperatures have dropped.

Note that sulcata tortoises DO NOT hibernate during the winter -- in their native environment, winter is a dry season, not a cold season. Therefore, if you live somewhere that has cold, snowy winters, you must be able to provide large, secure indoor quarters (along with appropriate heat and UVB light) for your sulcata tortoise.

Aquariums of any size are NOT suitable enclosures for sulcata tortoises. A tortoise table is a much better way to provide an indoor enclosure for juvenile sulcata. A tortoise table provides more room and better air circulation than a mere aquarium. We provide photographs and plan drawings of the tortoise tables that we've built on the [HOUSING](#) page of this website.

At some point, your tortoise will become large enough that it will be inconvenient to keep indoors. When this happens, you will need to construct a heated, secure tortoise shed to serve as the tortoise's nighttime home. We describe the requirements for such a shed on the [HOUSING](#) page.

UVB Light Requirements

Because they are from a very sunny, semi-arid environment, sulcata tortoises require a great deal of light to stay healthy and active; without high light levels, these tortoises can become lethargic. Sulcata tortoises also require daily exposure to UVB light to help them produce proper levels of Vitamin D3 in their bodies. Vitamin D3 is essential for the effective metabolism of calcium from food -- tortoises that lack sufficient levels of Vitamin D3 cannot build healthy bones and shells, no matter how much calcium they eat.

Sunlight is the single best source of UVB radiation, so the best and safest way to provide Vitamin D3 to your tortoise is to allow it to go outdoors and be exposed to sunlight for at least 20 minutes per day. If this is not possible where you live, then you must provide the tortoise with an artificial UVB light.

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Sulcata Station uses and recommends the Mega-Ray® 100 watt self-ballasted spot bulbs sold by the ReptileUV.com website. These bulbs put out higher levels of UVB as well as a good deal of heat. Be aware that, for safety reasons, you need to use a clamp lamp or reflector lamp with a ceramic socket with these bulbs.

The UVB/heat bulb should be placed so that it is approximately 18 to 20 inches above the top shell of the tortoise. You should be able to feel a comfortable level of heat – but not too much heat – when you place your hand at approximately the same height as your tortoise’s top shell.

Feeding Your Sulcata Tortoise

DO NOT ATTEMPT to maintain your sulcata tortoise on the following foods:

A steady diet of fruit and vegetables

Cat or dog food of any kind

Canned or dry commercial tortoise food, no matter who manufactures it

Want to know why we say this? Read our [DIET](#) Page

These tortoises thrive when they are allowed to graze at will in a large, safely enclosed, outdoor yard planted with a variety of grasses and edible weeds such as dandelion, mallow, plaintain (*Plantago* species), clover and so on. Make sure that the grasses and weeds have not been treated with pesticides, herbicides, or chemical fertilizers.

Grass hay (NOT alfalfa hay) IS a good staple food for sulcata. Grass hay is usually sold for horses or alpacas, so you may find local suppliers by calling feed stores in your area. If you cannot find grass hay in your area, please see our [LINKS](#) page for suppliers that will ship grass hay throughout North America.

Calcium and Vitamin Supplements

Sulcata hatchlings and juveniles grow relatively quickly, so they need additional calcium in their diets along with daily exposure to the UV radiation in sunlight. To a lesser degree, they may also benefit from regular vitamin supplements to make sure they are getting all required nutrients.

We’ve found that the easiest way to get calcium into our tortoises is to leave cuttlebones in their pens. We purchase cuttlebone in bulk from the [Cuttlebones Plus website](#). We remove the hard shell-like backing from each cuttlebone (a small flat-blade screwdriver seems to work best to pop this backing off), then break the cuttlebone into pieces and spread it around our tortoise enclosures. The tortoises chew on the cuttlebone when they need additional calcium.

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If you prefer to use a powdered calcium supplement, we recommend buying a human calcium supplement – one that contains calcium citrate and/or calcium maleate – in capsule form. Twice a week, open a capsule and mix the powder inside with a spoonful of canned pumpkin puree. (Sulcata love pumpkin puree, so anything mixed with the pumpkin will be eaten!) You could also sprinkle the powder lightly over dandelion greens instead (or any type of edible weeds) and offer it to your tortoise. Powdered supplements stick better to dampened greens, so wash the greens, shake off the excess water, then sprinkle the powdered supplements onto the greens.

Special powdered vitamin supplements for reptiles are also available, but it's easier and cheaper to use a human Centrum® vitamin pill, ground into powder. Use vitamin supplements in the same way that you use the calcium supplements (mixed with pumpkin puree or sprinkled lightly over washed greens), but use only a very small amount, and only once a week at most. Over-supplementing with vitamins can do as much or more harm than non-supplementing. Once a week is plenty for vitamin supplements!

Water Requirements

Tortoises do require water! Dehydration is probably the most common problem that hatchling tortoises can experience and it can actually be fatal to them.

Always make sure your tortoise has access to a water bowl of some type. The water bowl should be large enough for the tortoise to climb into, and shallow enough that the tortoise won't drown in it. The large plastic or terra cotta saucers that go underneath potted plants make excellent water bowls. Plastic saucers are much easier to clean and sterilize than the terra cotta ones. You can purchase these saucers at almost any home improvement or gardening supply store.

An alternative for larger tortoises is to use a round plastic snow saucer. These are typically sold in the sporting goods department of Target, Wal-Mart, etc. You can get them for less than \$5 each when these stores clear out their winter inventory in early spring.

Supplemental Humidity Sources

The smaller a tortoise is, the more easily it can become dehydrated. If you have a hatchling or juvenile tortoise, you should be aware that it can become severely dehydrated, literally overnight, if its habitat conditions are not corrected to prevent this.

You should provide a supplemental humidity source in the tortoise's enclosure – in addition to a shallow water bowl – to prevent overnight dehydration. One way to provide supplemental humidity is to pile up a deep, moisture-holding substrate like Sphagnum moss or Bed-A-Beast® in one corner of the tortoise's enclosure where the tortoise can dig in and sleep overnight. Make sure to keep this corner moistened.

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Another way to provide supplemental humidity is to provide a hide box with a dampened sponge attached inside it. To do this, find a large plastic storage container (make sure that your tortoise will fit inside easily). Discard the container lid. Cut a doorway large enough for your tortoise in the side of the container, glue a cellulose sponge to the inside-bottom of the container, then invert it and put it into your tortoise's enclosure. Make sure to dampen the sponge regularly.

Soaking Your Tortoise

Some owners choose to soak their tortoises in addition to providing a water bowl and a higher-humidity sleeping area. Hatchling (less than 1 year old) torts can be soaked every day, since they are the most likely to become dehydrated. Juvenile tortoises (between the ages of 1 year and 5 years) should be soaked two or three times per week. If you have an adult sulcata tortoise, make sure you provide it with a very shallow pond so that it can walk into the water to drink and soak as necessary.

The water in which you soak a tortoise should be comfortably warm -- but not hot. The water level should be no deeper than the base of the tort's neck. It's best to use some sort of plastic container that you can clean thoroughly after each use. Your tortoise may poop when placed into warm water, so be prepared to change the water at least once during each soak. Soaking time can range from 5 minutes to 15 minutes -- just don't let the water cool down too much. After the soak, dry the tortoise off with paper towels before you put it back into its pen or enclosure. (After all, you don't like to run around the house without drying off after your bath, do you?)

Other Sources for Good Care Information

- Sulcata Station's care sheet:
www.sulcata-station.org/pdf/sscaresheetrev.pdf
- Care sheet written by Marissa Armour of Turtle Homes:
www.sulcata-station.org/pdf/Sulcata_Caresheet2003.pdf
- The World Chelonian Trust's sulcata care sheet:
www.chelonia.org/Articles/sulcatacare.htm
- The Tortoise Trust's sulcata care sheet:
www.tortoisetrust.org/care/csulcata.html
- Melissa Kaplan's overview of sulcata care:
www.anapsid.org/sulcata.html