



SULCATA STATION

Switching Tortoises to a Healthier Diet

SUMMARY

Sulcata tortoises are a lot like human children -- once they get accustomed to eating veggies and fruit, they tend to ignore the grass hay and weeds that they should be eating. Your job as the owner is to get your tortoise off the bad food and onto a healthier diet of grasses and edible weeds.

There are two ways to approach this situation:

1. The "tough-love" approach: You completely stop giving the tortoise all the "bad" stuff like lettuce, greens, veggies, and so forth. Provide only grass and/or grass hay. Eventually, when your tortoise gets hungry enough, he'll give in and eat it; OR
2. You gradually wean the tortoise off the produce and veggies that it likes, but which isn't good for it, and onto a better diet.

Sulcata are native to the Sahel region of Africa, which is just south of the Sahara Desert. They can deal with very meager supplies of food and can easily handle not eating for a while, if they are healthy to begin with. That is why the "tough-love" approach can work, provided that the owner isn't too soft-hearted and doesn't give in before the tortoise does.

If you are soft-hearted, it may be easier on your conscience to change the tortoise's diet gradually. Here is how you can wean your tortoise off the greens and veggies, and onto a grass and/or grass hay-based diet:

OUR TECHNIQUE FOR STUBBORN TORTOISES

1. Put several large handfuls of grass/hay into a plastic bucket.
2. Use kitchen scissors or hedge clippers to cut the hay into shorter lengths. Don't worry about making all of it the same size, just chop it up. When you're done chopping, you should have grass hay that ranges from three or four inches long all the way down to "dust particle" size. We have a specific, five-gallon plastic bucket with a tight-fitting lid that we devote strictly to keeping this chopped-up grass hay on hand.
3. To feed your tortoise: Pull a handful of the chopped-up grass hay from the bottom of the bucket (make sure to get some of the smaller pieces and the "dust" as well) and put it into a gallon-size ziplock plastic bag.
4. To the bag, add: a small amount of very warm water, a small amount of grated "orange stuff" (this can be carrot, pumpkin, winter squash, or sweet potato -- basically, any veggie you have on hand that contains beta-carotene and lots of fiber) and a small amount of chopped-up greens to the bag. If you are using a calcium supplement, you can also add a small sprinkle of it to the bag.
5. Zip the bag almost all the way closed, then inflate the bag as much as possible and zip it completely shut.
6. Carefully shake the sealed, inflated bag to dampen and mix the grass, "orange stuff" and greens (and calcium supplement) well. Let the bag sit for about ten minutes so that the smells and flavors blend.

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7. Feed this mixture to your tortoise every other day or even every third day. The tortoise should be allowed to get hungry between feedings -- but it will not get hungry if you feed it every day. Trust us, your tortoise will not starve from being fed less often.

This sounds simple enough, right? The real trick lies in changing the proportions of each ingredient over time. When you start this process, the mixture will be mostly greens, some "orange stuff" and a small amount of grass hay. At each feeding, you gradually reduce the amount of greens and "orange stuff" and increase the amount of grass hay. It's fine to make this transition slowly. Your eventual goal should be a mixture of about 75 percent grass hay, 20 to 25 percent greens, a tiny bit of "orange stuff", and a minimal amount of water (enough to dampen the hay, mostly). Once you achieve that ratio of ingredients -- and the tortoise is eating it reliably -- you've achieved your goal! This mixture serves as a good basic maintenance diet for sulcata tortoises.

PLEASE NOTE: This mixture will get moldy if it's allowed to sit around uneaten. You should make it fresh every time you feed your tortoise.

Another method you can try if your tortoise still won't eat: Make this grass/greens/orange stuff mixture (but don't add the calcium supplement to it yet) in the morning and then let it sit in the ziplock bag for a couple of hours at room temperature. The dry grass will soak up the water and the liquid from the greens and grated orange stuff and rehydrate slightly. Just before you feed it to your tortoise, add the calcium supplement, then shake the ziplock bag well to mix it in thoroughly. Your tortoise might be more interested in it because everything will smell like greens and orange stuff.

ACCESS TO WATER IS CRUCIAL!

While you are in the process of changing the tortoise's diet, we strongly recommend soaking him every day to make sure that he remains properly hydrated. The tortoise will need to take in more water, either by soaking or by having access to a water dish (if he will drink by himself), to compensate for the water he's no longer getting via veggies. The extra water is needed to keep the tortoise from getting constipation.

You may notice a change in your tortoise's bowel movements as you change his diet. He may poop less frequently, and the poops may be less runny. These are both positive changes. A tortoise on the correct high-fiber diet produces poops that are firm, very fibrous, and smell vaguely like horse poop.

ADDING TREATS AND SUPPLEMENTS BACK INTO THE DIET:

Once you have gotten your tortoise to eat a grass-based diet, then you can slowly add back in other food items for variety. Foods like prickly pear cactus pads, flowers (roses, hibiscus, nasturtium, petunias, squash flowers), leaves (grapevine, hibiscus, mulberry, nasturtium) and non-toxic, edible weeds (dandelion, henbit, pigweed, mustard, chickweed, common mallow, etc.) can be chopped up and added to the grass/greens mix in small amounts, in place of the "orange stuff".

If you want to feed your tortoise dark leafy greens like collard greens, dandelion greens, Romaine lettuce, or arugula - feed these **ONLY** in small quantities, and **ONLY** once a week as a treat. The dark leafy greens are a great way to get the tortoise to eat calcium supplements and vitamin supplements. (Again, this is where ziplock bags come in very handy. We buy these in bulk at Costco because we go through so many of them!)

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Simply wash the greens and shake the excess water off well. Then tear up **one leaf** as if you were making yourself a very small salad. Put the torn-up greens into a ziplock bag. Sprinkle a tiny bit of vitamin powder and a slightly larger amount of calcium powder onto the greens, then zip the bag almost closed. Inflate the bag, then close it completely and shake it well. The powder will adhere to the moisture on the greens more or less evenly. Give the powder-coated greens to your tortoise immediately. We give our sulcata tortoises a small handful of these greens, covered with calcium carbonate powder and a small amount of vitamin powder, a couple of times per month.

Do not overuse the vitamin supplements! Too much can actually be worse than too little! You only need to provide these once a week at most. However, the calcium supplement can be added to food at every other feeding.

For more information related to this topic, visit Sulcata Station's [DIET](#) page.