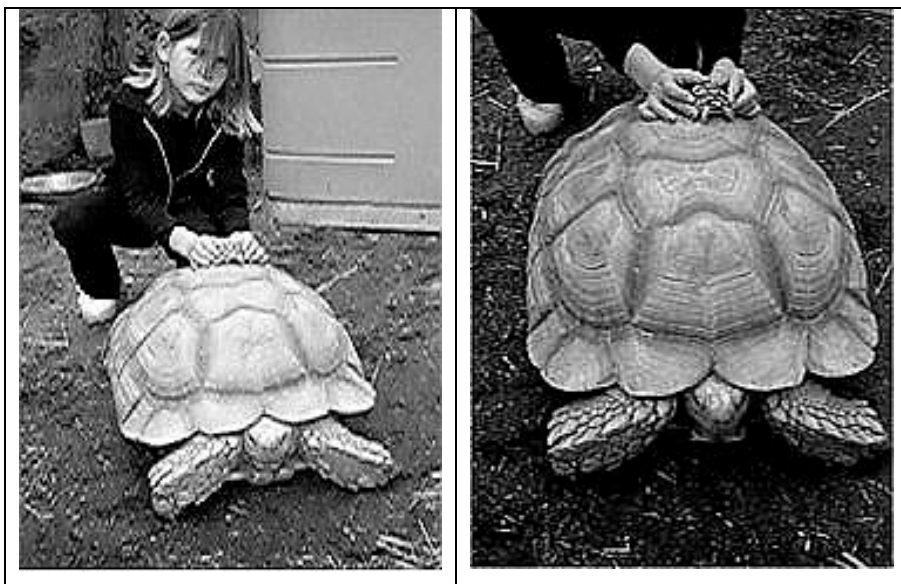


## So You Think You Want A Sulcata Tortoise?

Sulcata Tortoises are popular pets right now -- the hatchlings are cute, inexpensive, and relatively easy to care for. However, there are certain widespread misconceptions about these tortoises.

Here is what you need to know to determine whether or not a Sulcata is the right pet for you.



This little girl is holding a hatchling sulcata in her hands atop the shell of a full-grown adult sulcata.

(Photos copyright 1999 by Suzy Moren)

**Size/Weight:** Sulcata are the third largest tortoise species in the world (only Galapagos and Aldabra tortoises are larger). A sulcata can easily reach 18 inches in shell length and 12 inches in shell width and weigh up to 75 pounds by the time it is 10 years old -- basically, it will be the size and weight of a large truck tire and wheel, with mobility and a mind of its own. However, they are usually not done growing at that point, and can eventually reach a final length of over 2.5 feet and over 150 pounds in weight.

**Health Issues:** Sulcata torts are native to sub-Saharan Africa, so they must be kept warm and relatively dry year-around. They **DO NOT** hibernate during the winter, and freezing temperatures can kill them. They can quickly develop respiratory illnesses if they are exposed to cold and damp conditions. Most southern and southwestern states have a fairly good climate for sulcata during the spring, summer, and early fall. However, U.S. winters are too cold for them, and the typical late fall season can be too cool and damp. You must provide a warm, dry shelter for sulcata during those times.

**Proper Diet:** Sulcata torts are grazers and need a high-fiber, high-calcium, low-protein diet. About 80% of their diet should come from grazing on grasses and edible weeds, with the remaining 20% coming from dark leafy greens (dandelion, collards, and mustards). Sulcata require large amounts of calcium to grow healthy bone and shell, so a **calcium supplement is mandatory**. A steady diet of produce, fruit, or thawed frozen veggies is very **bad** for them and can cause lumpy shells and damage to their internal organs. Again, **they NEED high-fiber, low-nutrient food!** Most produce is too high in protein and most fruit is too high in sugar and water for Sulcata. These foods will cause Sulcata to alternately be

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constipated or have diarrhea. Note that Sulcata have been called “cows with shells” — they generate a lot of manure, and at a rate that is definitely proportional to their size.

**Water:** Tortoises do require some water. If your tortoise won't voluntarily drink from a shallow water dish, you will have to soak it in warm **shallow** (no deeper than the base of its throat) water for at least 10 minutes. Hatchlings must be soaked every day since they are at the greatest risk for dehydration. As the tortoise gets larger, it can be soaked less frequently

**Cages/Enclosure:** Sulcata are active tortoises and need large well-built enclosures with separate areas for heating up and for cooling off. Hatchlings can get by in a 20-long glass aquarium, but will probably outgrow it in a year or so. Tortoise tables are suggested for larger juveniles, and plans for such tables can be found on the Internet. Larger Sulcata require a secure outdoor pen and a heated, well-insulated shed for shelter at night or during cold or inclement weather.

### Assorted Other Facts:

1. Tortoises can live a very long time -- up to 100 years -- so purchasing one should be considered a lifetime commitment.
2. Tortoises, like most reptiles, require special enclosures, UV lamps, heat lamps, hide boxes, and vitamin/mineral supplements to keep them healthy. Make sure you can afford to buy and maintain all of this extra equipment when you buy a reptile pet.
3. Most zoos cannot afford to take in unwanted exotic pets, so **don't** count on giving your adult Sulcata to the local zoo when it's too big for you to handle. Sulcatas are not native to the United States, so you should never release one into the wild, either.

4. You **cannot** keep a Sulcata small by keeping it a small aquarium or by under-feeding it, and in fact, both of these actions are cruel.

5. Sulcata have been known to dig themselves burrows if they are not adequately housed. These burrows can be over 20 feet long and six to eight feet deep.

### Websites to Visit for More Information:

**Sulcata Station:** [www.sulcata-station.org](http://www.sulcata-station.org)

**World Chelonian Trust:** [www.chelonia.org](http://www.chelonia.org)

**Turtle Homes:** [www.turtlehomes.org](http://www.turtlehomes.org)

**Tortoise Trust:** [www.tortoisetrust.org](http://www.tortoisetrust.org)

**California Turtle and Tortoise Club:** [www.tortoise.org](http://www.tortoise.org)

### Recommended Reading:

*The Practical Encyclopedia of Keeping and Breeding Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles* by A.C. Highfield (1996, Carapace Press)

*The Care and Breeding of the African Spurred Tortoise Geochelone sulcata* by Richard and Robyn Wilson (1997, Carapace Press)