



California Desert Tortoise



Introduction:

The desert tortoise is a species that is protected under State and Federal Laws. It is illegal for anyone to take a tortoise from the desert, or to buy or sell one. In California, anyone who has possession of a desert tortoise must have a special permit. If you do have possession of a desert tortoise, be prepared to care for it for a very long time. Desert tortoises are known to live 60-80 years and can even live longer.

Feeding:

A healthy tortoise has a voracious appetite. Some outside plants that are suitable for consumption include weeds, dandelions, grasses, alfalfa, roses and hibiscus flowers. Provide the tortoise with other foods such as broccoli, squash, carrots, mixed veggies and other dark-green leafy vegetables. To add fiber, sprinkle ground-up rabbit or guinea pig pellets onto their food. To add calcium, offer peeled shells from hard-boiled eggs or cuttlefish bones.

Housing:

An adult tortoise requires a lot of room outside to exercise and browse. It also needs to have round-the-clock access to shelter as well as an appropriate place to sleep. If possible, give your tortoise the run of the entire yard, but make sure that the fence is escape-proof and that any pool area is fenced off. To keep your tortoise healthy, chemicals, pesticides or poisonous plants should not be in the area where your tortoise will have access.

Water:

A tortoise should have constant access to water in a shallow dish both for drinking and for soaking. Make sure the dish is large enough for the tortoise to climb into comfortably.

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Sexing:

When tortoises reach about 8 inches in length (5-10 years old, in captivity), it is easy to sex them. A male tortoise will have a somewhat concave plastron (bottom shell), whereas a female's plastron will remain flat. Adult male tortoises will have a longer tail, longer gular horns and enlarged glands under the chin.

Hibernation:

By late October, tortoises should start showing signs of the upcoming hibernation period. They will appear more sluggish, and they will eat less. A dog house insulated with soil, leaves or newspaper and covered with a tarp to keep out the elements is suitable enough for hibernation. Other owners prefer to store a tortoise in an insulated box inside the home or garage. Use common sense when it comes to properly hibernating your tortoise. Make sure it is in good health and that it is plump enough so that fat reserves can sustain it through the winter. Never hibernate a sick or injured tortoise. A hibernating tortoise must be checked on periodically, but take care not to disturb it. Beginning in March, the tortoise will become active again. A warm bath will encourage it to come out of the hibernation stage. Soon, a tortoise will resume its normal eating and exercising habits.

Health:

Tortoises tend to suffer from upper respiratory tract diseases. The owner should become familiar with a tortoise's normal behavior. Any change in behavior should be taken as a sign that something is wrong. If a tortoise becomes injured, it should be moved indoors to guard against parasites. Take a tortoise to the vet immediately if you notice weight loss, a runny nose, gasping or a lack of energy.

Desert Tortoise Facts

- Since the 1980s, tortoise populations have fallen 90%.
- Tortoises are able to live in areas where ground temperatures exceed 140°F.
- Desert tortoises spend 95% of their lives in underground burrows.
- Ravens are desert tortoises' primary predators.
- Ravens have caused more than 50% of juvenile tortoise deaths in some areas of the Mojave Desert.
- Tortoises primarily get water from moisture in the grasses and wildflowers they eat in the spring.
- Adult tortoises can survive a year or more without water.

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