



Burleydam
Garden Centre

Top Ten Questions & Answers



Top Ten Tortoise Questions and Answers for :-

Spur-thighed Tortoise (Testudo graeca)

Hermann's Tortoise (Testudo hermanni)

Marginated Tortoise (Testudo marginata)

Horsfield Tortoise (Testudo horsfieldi)



Q1 :- How do I get my Tortoise ready for Hibernation?

A1 :- During August and September, as days grow shorter, the light intensity decreases, the temperature begins to fall and tortoises prepare for hibernation. Feeding declines: it takes 4 -6 weeks (3-4 if under heat lamps) for their gut to empty, and before they start this process in early September the tortoises need a check over. By providing heat lamps in a green house you can delay this by a month or two, thus reducing the length of hibernation.

Make sure there are no signs of wounds, abscesses or other infections, and also that the mouth is clean and pink, the eyes are alert and bright. As a rough guide the Jackson ratio can be used but preferably accurate weight records should be kept that can be checked from year to year. Ensure that the area around the tail and cloaca is clean, there should always be water available even when you have stopped feeding.

Any tortoise which is underweight or suffering from an ailment should not be hibernated, but overwintered on an indoor tortoise table, or in an indoor run or vivarium. This should have a heat source and full spectrum light for 13-14 hours to prevent hibernation. The temperatures should be 26°C by day and 18-22°C at night. Fresh food and water should be provided. Never allow the temperature to go below 15°C.

Q2 :- How do I hibernate my Tortoise?

A2 :- If in a garage, shed or other frost free outhouse use a large, wooden, rodent proof tea chest or box, with small air holes in the sides.

Both the top and the holes should be covered in wire mesh to prevent vermin entering. Line the base and the sides of the box with thick pads of polystyrene or newspaper. Place the tortoise in an inner box with air holes and filled to about three quarters with polystyrene chips, dry leaves or shredded newspaper. Avoid hay or straw. Place the smaller box inside the larger box, making sure it can be opened easily for check ups.

Alternatively the fridge method can be employed. Here you need a larger fridge (no freezing compartment at the top) and the temperature needs to have been monitored for at least a month before the tortoise is put inside on the shelf. The ideal temperature is 5°C. The door of the fridge needs to be opened at least once a day to allow for an exchange of air. The tortoise can be put in a box, or wrapped in a towel. The tortoise can be carefully weighed on a weekly or twice monthly basis.

Make sure the tortoise is hibernated in a frost free environment, at temperatures of 4-8°C. Tortoises kept below freezing point can lose their eyesight or at worst their lives. Use a maximum /minimum thermometer (obtainable from garden shops) to check temperature changes.

For every drop of 10°C the heart rate drops 50%. At 4°C the respiratory movements are negligible. If the tortoise is kept too warm and becomes too active it will use up its fat and store of glycogen or animal starch in the liver, the latter is needed on emergence from hibernation. An adult tortoise loses about 1% of its pre hibernation weight so a 1000g tortoise is allowed to lose 10g monthly. A drastic weight loss or urination indicates something is wrong; the animal should be brought out of hibernation immediately and checked.

Q3 :- What do I do after hibernation?

A3 :- Tortoises should be checked regularly especially from the end of January. When the animal starts moving take it out of its hibernation quarters.

1. Bring it out of hibernation slowly, check for discharges from the nose and tail end.
2. Inspect it carefully, bathe the face and eyes and wash the mouth.

3. Give the animal a warm bath for at least half an hour. It is important that the tortoise empties its bladder to get rid of the toxic waste accumulated during hibernation and that it replenishes its water supply by drinking.
4. Keep the animal warm during the day and indoors overnight until the nights get warmer.
5. Once out of hibernation and eating, keep it active (as for over-wintering) if the weather becomes cold again. Warm spells in February breaking hibernation are a hazard of the British climate.

Any tortoise not feeding or appearing ill should be taken to a veterinary surgeon without delay.

Q4 :- Why can't I just leave them in the garden?

A4 The tortoise is a living fossil, having survived since the dawn of the age of reptiles, 200 million years ago evolved to live in a warm climate. In Britain, with wet summers and cold damp winters, they are outside their distribution range, but if basic guidelines are followed, a captive tortoise can have as long and happy a life as possible.

Q5 How do I look after my tortoise?

A5 Tortoises like roaming about, so if possible make the garden completely escape proof. Walled gardens are ideal but if you have to pen your tortoise in, allow at least 10 square metres per tortoise and make sure that the animal can neither climb over nor burrow under the surround. Pens with solid walls should be at least 50cm high, buried to a depth of 10cm, with wooden stakes as support. Garden ponds should be adequately covered to prevent risk of drowning.

A well ventilated greenhouse with access to a lawn and a paved sunbathing area is ideal for tortoises, as in both spring and autumn the animals will be able to heat up sufficiently to feed well,

thereby extending their summer and shortening their hibernation period. A lower pane of glass can be replaced with a panel of wood with an entrance hole or cat flap in it, thus ensuring that the tortoises can escape from overheating on the hottest summer days. It should be remembered that glass filters out all of the sun's ultra violet rays.

Never attempt tethering a tortoise by string round the leg, which will cut off blood circulation and may result in gangrene, or by boring holes through the shell, which will cut through live tissue and cause pain or infection. Do NOT oil your tortoise's shell. A waterproof house in a sunny position is essential to protect the tortoise from extremes of cold, wet and heat. It can be of a wooden construction, preferably covered with roofing felt and be slightly raised to prevent the floor from becoming damp. It can be lined with thick newspaper or dried leaves. The house need not be very high as the tortoise will feel safer in an enclosed space.

All substrates used should be non abrasive, digestible, non toxic and easy to clean.

If you have several tortoises keep them in single species in groups of no more than five to reduce disease risk. It is advisable to separate the males and females as the males often engage in female shell butting and leg biting as part of their courtship. Females constantly exposed to this treatment, and unable to escape, will feed less, produce eggs less frequently and will eventually suffer from extensive shell and leg damage with an increased likelihood of infections.

Q6 What should I feed my tortoise?

A6 Contrary to belief tortoises do drink, especially on waking from hibernation. A shallow dish about 10cm deep should be sunk into the ground. A cat litter tray part filled with water at 24°C

can be used as a bath for 10-30 minutes. Tortoises placed in the bath should be supervised to prevent drowning.

Tortoises need a diet which is high in fibre, vitamins and minerals, but low in fat and proteins, and they feed mainly on green leaves. If your tortoise has the run of a garden it will forage quite successfully for itself on charlock, chickweed, clover, dandelion, groundsel, plantains, sow thistle and vetches, often complete with flowers, and the leaves of plants and bushes like buddleia, ice plant, lilac, rose and bramble. Make sure you have a tortoise friendly garden containing no poisonous plants. Propagate your own weeds if you can. Seeds are obtainable from various seed merchants. Beware of weed killers and slug pellets especially if foods are gathered away from your own premises. Always wash wild foods thoroughly before feeding.

At times of year when suitable weeds are hard to find a wide variety of greens and salad must be offered. The diet should be guided by the situation in the wild. Fruit is sometimes eaten but it should only form a minor part of the diet. Vegetables should be fed raw and in moderation. Avoid excess of one food type, such as brassicas, which **should** only be fed as part of a varied diet. If a tortoise is not eating, advice should be sought within a week.

In their natural habitat, tortoises are opportunistic feeders and they will occasionally tackle carrion and dung. Their digestive systems are, however, geared towards the digestion of cellulose, so high protein items like dog and cat food and peas are not natural and can be harmful, especially in juveniles.

Foods should be dusted with an appropriate vitamin and mineral supplement two or three times a week. The quality of supplements varies and advice from a reliable source should be sought. Calcium carbonate can be scattered on the ground daily to provide additional calcium especially for egg laying females as they have a far higher calcium requirement.

Q7 How do I sex a Tortoise?

A7 Male Tortoise have a longer tail than females, but have a look at the BCG website, look under care sheets and then *Mediterranean Tortoises*, and select *Care of Mediterranean Tortoises*.

Q8 How do I cut overgrown nails and beaks?

A8 If you have not done it before, it is best to go to a vet used to dealing with Tortoises, ask him to show you what to do as he is cutting them, if you feel confident you can do them yourself next time

Q9 How do I stop my Tortoise getting overgrown nails?

A9 Your Tortoise needs a hard surface to walk over to keep its nails worn down, e.g. slate, concrete Patio, sandstone etc.

Q10 How do I stop my Tortoise getting an overgrown beak?

Tortoise's beaks keep growing, as they wear down in the wild eating tough leaf material. To emulate this you need to give your Tortoise as much leaf material as possible (our leaf material is not as tough as that growing in the *Mediterranean*) If you leave a piece of cuttlefish in the run, they may chew at it wearing down the beak. (plus providing extra calcium)

You can obtain further information on tortoise and terrapin care by consulting the BCG website

<http://www.britishcheloniagroup.org.uk/>

or by writing to:

British *Chelonia* Group, P.O. Box 1176, *Chippenham*, Wilts SN15 1DP. **Please enclose a SAE.**

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