

# Caring for your Mediterranean tortoise

**How to keep pet tortoises  
healthy and happy**



**Notcutts**

GARDEN INSPIRATION SINCE 1897

# Caring for your Mediterranean tortoise



## Are Mediterranean tortoises right for me?

Mediterranean tortoises (also called the Hermann's tortoise) will generally live for up to 70 years but some have been known to reach 100 years old. They are a lifetime companion and as such, require a big commitment, probably for the rest of your life. Choosing a tortoise as a pet should be a considered decision because of their long lifetime and the fact that they are relatively demanding in terms of the specific environment they need.

Mediterranean tortoises are not well suited as pets for young children as they can excrete Salmonella and therefore strict personal hygiene is essential. Whilst they tolerate handling, this isn't an easy thing to do and requires a strong, firm touch.

They naturally live in the bush and scrublands of the Mediterranean and are most active during the day.

## Choosing a new pet tortoise

When selecting your tortoise, check these signs that he is healthy:

- Activity and moving freely
- Good muscle tone in his limbs
- Smooth, solid shell with no damage
- Clear and dry eyes and nose
- Clear and pink mouth
- Clean and dry tail
- Healthy skin and appetite

## The first few days

We advise buying and setting up your enclosure a few days in advance of bringing your tortoise home. This gives you time to get used to setting the humidity and creating the ideal environment for him to settle in.

When he arrives home, pick him up by holding either side of his shell with your fingers stretched out underneath to support his body. This will stop him from getting dropped.

Carefully place him in his enclosure and then leave him alone to get used to his new surroundings.

We recommend that you keep handling to a minimum during the first week until he is more comfortable in his new home and is feeding regularly.

## Creating a happy home

Mediterranean tortoises need plenty of space to move about and their enclosure should maintain a low humidity.

The best enclosure for this is a "Tortoise Table" which is a low sided, (not too low for them to be able to climb out) open top enclosure that allows excellent humidity control and is heated from above.

Wooden vivariums can also be used but care must be taken that there is enough air flow.

The best bedding layer is a sand/soil mix designed to simulate their normal environment and allow natural behaviour.

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As tortoises are active, inquisitive animals their enclosure should be decorated with logs and rocks to give them something to explore.

In the summer they love to be outdoors in a suitable, secure enclosure with areas of shade.

## Heating and lighting

In the wild, tortoises are used to basking in sunlight so they will need a heat source in their enclosure.

This can be provided using bulbs which will provide UVA, UVB and heat and UV.

Basking lamps in a vivarium must always be controlled with a thermostat, we recommend a dimming thermostat. The basking spot can be between 32°C and 35°C, with the cool end of the enclosure at about 20°C. No additional heating is needed at night as long as the temperature does not fall below 10°C and the daytime temperatures are adequate.

Mediterranean tortoises need regular access to fresh water. Give them a bath 2 or 3 times a week when they will drink if they want to (and usually go to the toilet at the same time). At other times, a shallow dish can be provided. Water must be changed daily.

## A healthy diet and treats

The best tortoise diet consists of green leaves and flowers of wild plants that are found in their natural habitat. Dandelions, chickweed, sow thistle, mallow, pansies and shepherd's purse are just a few examples of suitable plants.

You can use some pre-prepared greens such as watercress, green leaf salad (not green lettuce such as Iceberg) and rocket but these are not a substitute for his staple diet.

If you're able to grow plants from seed, why not try a grow your own tortoise food seed kit?

There are several pellet foods available too but these should only be used as a supplement to a more suitable, natural diet. You can soak pellets to make them more palatable in freshly squeezed orange juice straight from the fruit but not too often.

Avoid lettuce, fruit, tomatoes, carrots and cabbage as these are unsuitable for this species of tortoise. Also only give high sugar fruits such as strawberries in moderation.

Multi-vitamin supplements can be applied direct to fresh foods such as salads in order to enrich your tortoise's diet.

## Getting to know you

All tortoises should be handled firmly and care taken not to drop them.

They are very strong and can easily push away from you if not held correctly.

Carefully grasp both sides of his shell with your fingers underneath supporting the weight of him and your thumbs above holding him firmly (without squeezing hard).

Always wash your hands before and after handling your tortoise.

## Tortoise hibernation

Mediterranean tortoises normally hibernate in the wild but not all species do.

Hibernation can be a complicated subject with many factors to consider such as your tortoise's health, different methods of hibernation, preparation, length of hibernation and how to care for tortoises coming out of hibernation.

Only healthy animals should ever be hibernated. We recommend taking your tortoise to the vet for a health check beforehand and specific advice on what approach to hibernation you should take for your tortoise.

## Mediterranean tortoises and other pets

Different species of tortoise should never be kept together as they can carry infections that are harmless to them but deadly to another species.

New tortoises should be quarantined before being allowed to mix with current pets.

## Potential health issues with Mediterranean tortoises

Tortoises are susceptible to a variety of illnesses which will need the advice of a vet. If you see any of the symptoms of the conditions listed below, always take your tortoise to see the vet straight away.

### Rhinitis, sinusitis or runny nose syndrome

Symptoms include discharge from the nostrils and watery eyes. These symptoms can lead to upper respiratory tract disease or pneumonia in the lungs if gone untreated.

### Stomatitis (mouthrot or canker)

This is often seen after your tortoise has hibernated. In the mouth it appears as a general inflammation or caseous (cheesy) material attached to the tongue, mouth and throat.

### Osteodystrophy (soft shell)

This can result from a combination of calcium deficiency, incorrect lighting and excessive protein in the diet.



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## Diarrhoea

This is a sign of ill-health, care problems, a dietary imbalance or parasites. Check for undigested food, mucus or worms in faeces.

## Blindness or disorientation

This usually happens after hibernation but can be caused by frost damage. If affected, your tortoise will shuffle in circles and won't feed.

## Worms

Tortoises kept outside will often catch worms. It is a good idea to have them checked annually for worms and treated if necessary.

## Finding a vet

If you have any worries about your tortoise, please consult your local vet as soon as possible. All vets have a basic knowledge of reptiles, but a reptile specialist may be worth finding just in case.

## Pet insurance for your tortoise

As tortoises live for so many years and are susceptible to illness, we highly recommend that you insure your pet tortoise as soon as he is settled into his new home.

## Your new pet checklist

- Tortoise table or vivarium
- Bedding
- Basking lamp and fitting (as required)
- Dimming thermostat
- Reptile UV fluorescent tube or metal halide lamp
- Water bowl
- Logs and rocks for decoration
- Thermometer



# Help and further advice

If you have any questions about caring for your pet, our fully trained team are happy to help if they can, or advise on where to find more specialist information.

Whilst there is a wealth of information available online, only a professional will be able to correctly answer your query. If in doubt, call your local vet for an appointment.

It is against the law to release, or allow to escape, non-native animals or birds. If you have trouble caring for any animals contact our team for advice.



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