

The African spurred or sulcata tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) is the world's third largest tortoise and is native to the arid savannahs, scrublands and desert fringes of sub-Saharan Africa. Reaching an adult length of 2.5 feet and weighing 120 pounds or more, these tortoises require a substantial amount of space and need extensive outdoor and indoor accommodations. Although starting off as small adorable hatchlings, they grow very large and extremely heavy with needs that quickly surpass many keepers' expectations and abilities.

In their natural habitat, these tortoises are vegetarians, feeding on grasses, shrubs and succulent plants. Their harsh environment is sparsely vegetated, and they have evolved to cope with a life where food and water are not plentiful.

As a result, overfeeding and/or feeding inappropriate items in captivity are common causes of problems in this species.

African spurred tortoises are extremely powerful animals and are quite fond of digging, necessitating sturdy strong enclosures. They are solidly built with a broad flattened shell that is deeply indented between the scutes. The skin is thick golden yellow-brown, and the thighs are adorned with 2-3 large spurs. Despite the challenges of owning this magnificent giant, its outgoing and generally docile personality as well as its natural beauty have earned it great praise and popularity among tortoise keepers.

Zoological Education Network provides educational materials about exotic companion animals.

Most Common Disorders of Sulcata Tortoises

- Nutritional disorders (often resulting in metabolic bone disease, shell pyramiding and soft shell)
- Dehydration in hatchlings/juveniles
- Respiratory infections
- Kidney disease
- Bladder stones
- Shell infections
- Abscesses
- Injuries
- Ticks
- Intestinal parasites
- Diarrhea

Regular visits to your reptile veterinarian should be scheduled to check for parasites and other early signs of disease and to promote a long, satisfying relationship with your sulcata tortoise. For help in finding a reptile veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (ARAV) by visiting www.ARAV.org and click on "Member Directory."

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SULCATA TORTOISE



Companion Reptile Care
S E R I E S

What to Expect from Your Sulcata Tortoise

African spurred tortoises, also known as “sulcatas,” are outgoing, inquisitive and active tortoises that are becoming increasingly popular in captivity.

Most sulcatas are sold as tiny hatchlings that will easily fit in the palm of one’s hand. However, these small pets quickly grow large—in fact, sulcatas are the third largest tortoise species in the world. Their long life span requires a substantial long-term commitment.

Is Your Tortoise a Male or Female?

As juveniles, there is little difference between male and female sulcatas. It is not until they reach 12-14 in (30-36 cm) in length (typically 3-4 years of age) that they begin to show physical differences in gender. In comparison to females, male sulcatas are larger, have a longer thicker tail that folds to the side, and a wider anal scute that is deeply divided. Additionally, males develop elongated gular scutes and a deep concavity to the plastron, which the females do not possess.

Diet

Sulcata tortoises are strict herbivores. In captivity they require a very high-fiber, low-protein, low-fat, low-sugar, grass-based diet to stay healthy.

The best foods for a sulcata tortoise include mixed fresh grasses, grass hays (e.g., timothy, orchard grass), clover, dandelion, edible flowers and spineless *Opuntia* cactus pads. A smaller part of the diet may consist of dark leafy greens (e.g., collard greens, kale, carrot tops, mustard greens, endive, watercress) and other vegetables. Excessive quantities of protein-rich vegetables (e.g., beans, peas) are not recommended. The exclusive use of commercially available pelleted diets for tortoises is controversial, but these may be used as a portion of sulcata diets. Adding calcium supplements and Sunshine

Factor® may be beneficial. Foods containing animal-based proteins, such as dog/cat foods or insects, should be avoided. Fresh water should be available at all times. The water dish should be large enough to allow the tortoise to soak—with the water level up to the shell bridge and shallow enough to allow easy exit.

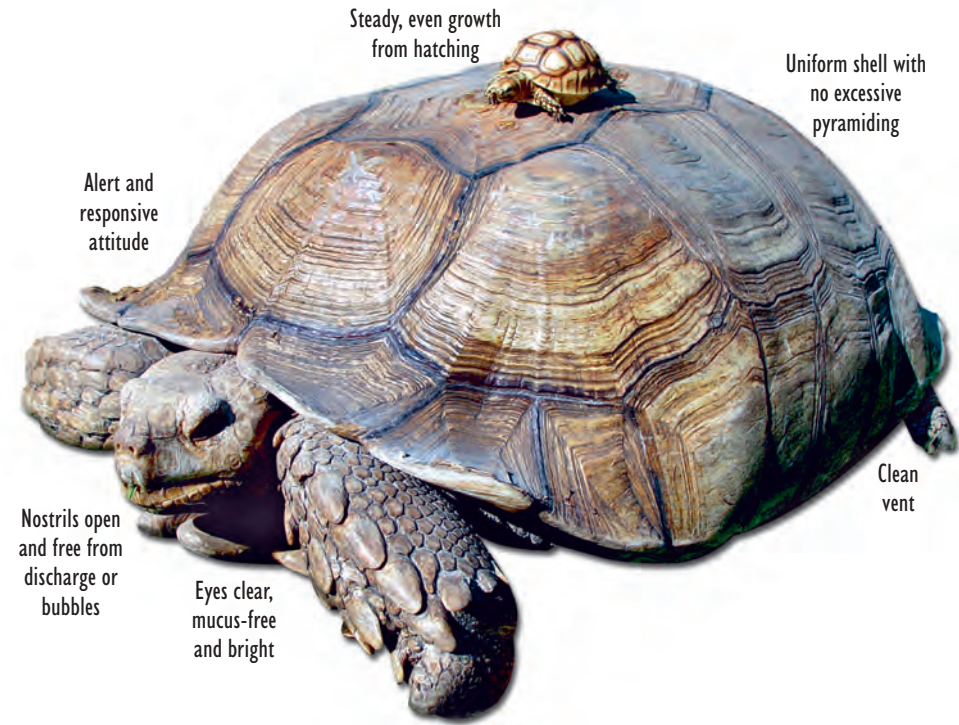
Housing

Sulcata tortoises do not hibernate, and the ideal housing for one of any age is located outdoors with natural sunlight and ventilation. For small and medium sulcatas (up to 12 in [30 cm]), a pen may be fashioned using railroad ties or posts to form a perimeter fence, with special attention to make it escape-proof, as sulcatas can burrow under fencing and can even push over inadequate fencing as they become adults. Adult sulcatas need a minimum of an 8 ft x 8 ft (2.4 m x 2.4 m) area per individual. Hiding shelters should be available to provide shade and protection. A dry, heated area should be provided for nighttime and inclement weather. The substrate can be a sand/soil/peat mixture or a pesticide-free patch of lawn. In some areas, the top of the pen will need a secure covering to keep predators out. Bringing the tortoise inside at night may also be necessary to prevent predation or theft.

If an indoor enclosure must be used for a young sulcata, the best accommodation is a glass terrarium or plastic/polyethylene tub. The enclosure should be large enough (minimum 20 gallon tank) so that a temperature gradient may be established using a basking light, from 90-95°F (32-35°C) on the hot end to 75-85°F (24-30°C) on the cool end. Captive tortoises not exposed to natural sunlight will also need a high-quality UVB-emitting light source. Cage accessories are provided by offering cork bark, driftwood, plastic shelters and non-poisonous plants.

*www.HarrisonsPetProducts.com

What Your Veterinarian Looks for in a Healthy Sulcata Tortoise



Steady, even growth from hatching

Uniform shell with no excessive pyramiding

Alert and responsive attitude

Clean vent

Nostrils open and free from discharge or bubbles

Eyes clear, mucus-free and bright

How to Keep Your Sulcata Tortoise Healthy, Happy, and Safe!

- ✓ Take a newly purchased sulcata tortoise to an exotic animal veterinarian for a wellness examination and fecal check for parasites.
- ✓ Quarantine new tortoises in a separate area for at least 30 days.
- ✓ Provide a high-fiber, low-protein, low-fat, low-sugar diet.
- ✓ Because these tortoises do not hibernate, they must be provided with warm winter housing in temperate climates.
- ✓ Allow sulcatas to dig burrows in their outdoor enclosures, which is part of their natural behavior.
- ✓ Allow the tortoise to have access to water deep enough for soaking to maintain proper hydration.

Outdoor housing for your sulcata tortoise should:

- ✓ be warm and dry with exposure to natural sunlight
- ✓ be secure from predators, such as cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes and foxes
- ✓ contain shelter from environmental elements
- ✓ be escape proof, as they are good climbers and diggers

Indoor enclosures should:

- ✓ contain rabbit pellets, grass hay, paper towels or peat as a substrate
- ✓ include exposure to artificial UVB lighting and a basking spot for 10-12 hours a day
- ✓ allow as much floor space as possible with proper ventilation

It is important for sulcata tortoises to avoid:

- ✗ free roam of the house
- ✗ hot rocks or direct contact with heating elements or light sources
- ✗ overabundance of food or feeding of inappropriate diet items
- ✗ cat or dog food of any kind and insects
- ✗ a steady diet of fruits and protein-rich vegetables
- ✗ oversupplementation of vitamins or minerals
- ✗ damp or cold conditions
- ✗ items that might cause the tortoise to tumble over onto its back
- ✗ inappropriate items that might be ingested, because sulcatas will swallow almost anything