



HOUSING YOUR PET TURTLE

What type of cage does my turtle require?

Turtles may be housed inside or outside, depending upon environmental conditions and owner preference. Discuss the best option with your veterinarian.

If you choose to house your turtles indoors, a 10 or 20-gallon aquarium is usually adequate.

Does my turtle need bedding in his cage?

Substrate, or bedding material, should be easy to clean and nontoxic to the turtle. Newspaper, butcher paper, towels, or preferably AstroTurf is recommended. When using AstroTurf, buy two pieces and cut them to fit the bottom of the cage. With two pieces, one is placed in the cage and one is kept outside the cage and is always clean. When the turf inside the cage becomes soiled, you'll always have a clean, dry piece to replace it. Clean the soiled turf with ordinary soap and water (avoid harsher products unless your reptile veterinarian approves them), thoroughly rinse it, and hang it to dry to be used at the next cage cleaning.

Alfalfa pellets can also be used for bedding and are often eaten by the turtle, which is acceptable. **AVOID** sand, gravel, wood shavings, corn cob material, walnut shells, and cat litter, as these are not only difficult to clean but can cause impaction if eaten on purpose or accidentally should the food become covered by these substrates. **Cedar wood shavings are toxic to reptiles!**

What else do I need in the cage?

Natural branches are enjoyed by the turtle. Make sure they are secure and won't fall onto the turtle and injure it. Ideally, the branch should slope from the bottom of the enclosure to the top and end near a heat source so the turtle can bask. Rocks (large ones) in the cage also allow for basking. A hiding place is appreciated by all reptiles and should be available. Artificial plants can be arranged to provide a hiding place, as can clay pots, cardboard boxes, and other containers that provide a secure area.

A heat source is necessary for all reptiles, which are cold-blooded and need a range of temperatures to regulate their internal body temperature. Ideally, the cage should be set up so that a heat gradient is established, with one area of the tank warmer than the other end. In this way, the turtle can move around its environment and warm or cool itself as needed. Purchase two thermometers and place one at the cooler end of the cage and one at the warmer end near the heat source. The cooler end of the cage should be approximately 70°-75° F, while the warmer end should be 90° -100° F. An inexpensive way to do this is to supply a focal heat source using a 100-watt incandescent bulb with a reflector hood,

although pet stores sell other types of heat lamps. Your heat source should be placed OUTSIDE and above one end of the cage, which should be covered by a screen top to prevent the turtle from escaping or burning itself on the bulb. At night, heat isn't necessary as long as the temperature remains at 65° -70° F.

Heating pads can also be used for heat; speak with your veterinarian to learn the correct way to use them if you choose this form of heating.

"Hot Rocks" or "Sizzle Rocks" are dangerous, ineffective, and should be avoided!

What about UV light?

UV light is necessary to provide Vitamin D-3. Failure to provide UV light can predispose your turtle to metabolic bone disease, a common condition of pet turtles.

The UV light should emit light in the UV-B range (290-320 nanometers). Combining a blacklight (such as one from General Electric) with a Vita-Lite, Chroma-50, or Colortone-50 in a two-bulb fixture is an excellent way to provide UV light, although many turtles do well with just a Vita-Lite. Your veterinarian may recommend other brands of UV light that also provide a source of Vitamin D-3.

The UV output of these lights decreases with age; they should be replaced every six months. For UV light to work, it must reach the pet in an unfiltered form, which means that you must make sure there is no glass or plastic interposed between the pet and the light. Finally, the light should be within 6-12 inches from the turtle in order for the pet to receive any benefit.

If you choose to house your turtle outdoors, it should be contained within an enclosure. Make sure a shaded area is provided, as well as a hiding area. Turtles can dig out of enclosures, so bury the fencing 6-12 inches or put bricks or rocks under the area. Some owners find a childrens wading pool a suitable environment. Astro turf can be used for lining material, or grass, twigs, and other natural material will be fine IF it is changed daily (**avoid cedar as it is toxic to reptiles**). Of course, food and fresh water must always be available. Bring the turtle indoors if the temperature drops below 60°F (16 °C). Finally, remember that turtles can become prey for neighborhood dogs and cats, so keep this in mind when housing a turtle outdoors.