

African Spur-thigh Tortoise Care Sheet

Basic Information and Care Requirements

(Also known as: African Tortoise and Moorish Tortoise)

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Introduction:

The name Spur Thigh applies to several different tortoises in the Mediterranean region, all of which are very similar in appearance. We will break it down into regional applications. Use our online guide to identifying Mediterranean tortoises to determine which type of tortoise you have. The African Spur-thigh tortoise comes from the Mediterranean regions of North Africa and Southern Spain. They are a small tortoise, and tend to be “environmentally” sensitive. You will need a lot of space and a good environment to keep these tortoises happy and healthy. We also recommend housing them separately from any other species. All Spur-thigh tortoises are threatened in their natural ranges by habitat loss and pet trade collection.

There is another common mistake you need to be wary of. Do not mistake the spur-thigh tortoise (small) with the African spurred tortoise (very large!)

Basic Information:

Scientific Name – *Testudo (graeca) graeca*

Natural Habitat – These tortoises inhabit semi-arid scrub lands and hillsides, preferably with thick vegetation. These regions were once forested. Their approximate range is given in red on the map.

Size – Average is ~ 5-6” for males, ~6-7 inches for females.

Lifespan – expect from 50 - 75 years for a healthy animal



Diet – Spur-thigh tortoises need very little protein or fat, and lots of fiber in their diet. We do not recommend using commercial tortoise diets for this species because they are largely comprised of soy protein. A diet of mostly orchard/prairie hay, grasses, clover, dandelions, edible flowers, is ideal. The edible flowers have been noted as more critical for these tortoises than most. Collards, kale, turnip greens can be fed in moderation, as well as squashes, carrots and other vegetables. We recommend feeding fruit sparingly because the sugars can lead to diarrhea and colic. The bulk of their diet should consist of fresh weeds, hays, and grasses. Vitamin supplementation 2-3 times per week is a must!

You will need to provide drinking water for these tortoises, but should limit the amount of soaking they do to no more than once a week. Provide a dish which is deep enough for them to soak up to their legs, but not submerge. They do not normally have pools of water in the wild, and they can easily drown. While they do live in dry environments in the wild, a dry cage in your home is too dry, and they need some access to water.

Housing - Outdoor pens are preferred for this species. Pens must have an underground barrier along every wall or your tortoise will burrow under in record time. We recommend at least 10 inches of barrier underground, and 6 feet by 6 feet of floor space. Build any enclosure with this in mind. In outdoor pens, provide plenty of shade and shelters to hide in during the hottest part of the day. These tortoises will need to come inside of the house or a greenhouse during cold months in cooler climates (below ~ 50°F these tortoises begin to hibernate). Be cautious of too much humidity as it can lead to respiratory and eye infections.

Smaller tortoises can be kept in aquariums, but we recommend custom tortoise table designs to provide adequate room to move around indoors. Pens such as cement mixing tubs or large storage bins will also do for short term housing. Long, short enclosures work best, providing more floor space. In addition to paper, play sand and top soil mixed together can provide a good substrate which allows burrowing. If you use a sandy substrate, feed them on a dish or smooth surface to avoid having them eat sand with their meal. Include a shelter for the tortoise to hide under. If you do use a glass enclosure, cover the sides with a visual barrier to avoid having your tortoise constantly try to push through the glass.

Lighting and Heating - Design your enclosure large enough to provide a temperature range for your animal. Your tortoise needs an ambient temperature around 75-80°F from spring to fall. A hot spot should be provided which reaches about 95°F. Temperatures can drop into the mid 60's at night. We recommend spot lights or ceramic heaters, and do not recommend the use of hot rocks. In addition, a pig blanket or heating pad under the enclosure can provide a little extra heat and prevent exposure to cold floors. Reptile day bulbs can be used to provide ambient light and heat. **Do not use a white light at night!** A 12 – 14 hour cycle is best for the health of your animal. Ideally, you should vary the photo-period to mimic light period changes seasonally. You must have a temperature gradient so that part of the cage is ambient, and part of it is in the hot spot. This will allow your tortoise to pick its own optimum temperature. Be sure that any bulb or ceramic heater is positioned so that the animal cannot touch it.

You will have to provide a source of UVA/B light for these tortoises. You can use either fluorescent bulbs or mercury vapor bulbs. Be cautious when purchasing bulbs, the packaging should clearly state that the bulb provides BOTH UVA and UVB. Products labeled as Day Lights are generally only for white light and heat, not UV. Fluorescent bulbs must be hung no more than about 12 inches from the basking spot to provide proper levels of UV light, and should be replaced every six months. Mercury vapor bulbs are more expensive, but have the advantage of providing UVA/B light from 4-8 feet from the bulb, as well as heat for a basking spot. They also last longer than fluorescents.

Use several thermometers to check the temperature in the cool side, warm side, and the hot spot. If your tortoise tends to stay in certain areas, then those would be good places to monitor the temperature.

Hibernation - Your spur-thigh tortoise should be allowed to hibernate during part of the year. Not hibernating the tortoise can lead to problems in the long term. See a guide to hibernation for information on how to best achieve a safe hibernation environment and temperature range. Several can be found on the Tortoise Trust web site at www.tortoisetrust.org.

Choosing a turtle and acclimating it to your home - When choosing a pet, look for an individual that is active and responsive to handling, and which feels strong and muscular. Animals which show sunken eyes (dehydration); pitting in the shell; lumps along the body; signs of external parasites such as ticks or mites (look closely around the mouth, eyes, and cloaca); signs of runny or bloody feces in the tank (internal parasites), any discharge of mucus from the mouth, nose, or eyes may be unhealthy. If possible, find out if the animal is eating well, and what it has been fed.

Provide a good set up, and give it some time to adjust to its new home. It may take several weeks for your tortoise to settle in. During this time, focus on establishing a routine of feeding and cleaning, but do not attempt to handle the animal unless necessary.

A visit to a veterinarian is recommended for a fecal exam to detect internal parasites. Take the time to locate and visit a vet in your area who specializes in exotics. Taking this time now will save you some time later should your animal become ill or be injured.

Some Sources for More Information:

De Vosjoli, Philippe, Popular Tortoises. Mission Viejo, CA: Advanced Vivarium Systems, 1996.
www.avsbooks.com

Highfield, Andy C., Practical Encyclopedia of Keeping and Breeding Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles. London, England: Carapace Press, 1996. www.vidi-herp.com

Ferri, Vincenzo, Turtles & Tortoises, Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books Ltd., 2002

Ernst, Carl H. and Roger W. Barbour, Turtles of the World, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

Pursall, Brian, Mediterranean Tortoises, Neptune City, NJ: TFH Publications, Inc., 1994.

For a more detailed information, please read our advanced care sheets at www.grare.org/library/care.html