

Margined Tortoise Care Sheet

Basic Information and Care Requirements

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Introduction:

The margined tortoise comes from the Mediterranean regions of Southern Greece and Sardinia. It is the largest tortoise of the genus *Testudo*, reaching up to 14 inches in length. They are very intelligent, quickly becoming adapted to feeding and activity routines and they are inquisitive. Margined tortoises are threatened in their natural ranges by habitat loss and pet trade collection.

Basic Information:

Scientific Name – *Testudo marginata*

Natural Habitat – These tortoises inhabit evergreen scrub lands and hillsides, preferably with thick vegetation. Their approximate range is given in red on the map.



Size – Average is ~ 8-10", they can grow up to 14" in shell length.

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

Diet – Margined 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. 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 grasses.

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 4 feet by 2 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 40'sF). 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 during most of the year. A hot spot should be provided which reaches about 95°F. Temperatures can drop into the upper 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. 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 thermo regulate and 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 marginated tortoise should be allowed to hibernate during part of the year. 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.avbooks.com

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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