

# African Spurred Tortoise (Sulcata) Care Sheet

## Basic Information and Care Requirements

Produced by GRARE – Oct. 27, 2004, [www.grare.org](http://www.grare.org)



### Introduction:

The sulcata is the world's third largest species of tortoise, reaching sizes of over 150-200 pounds. This alone makes it a challenging animal to keep. They have tremendous personalities, and huge appetites to go with their size. Coming from North Africa, they require a semi-arid, desert like environment. Do not confuse this tortoise with the Spur-Thigh Tortoise which is a small Mediterranean species.

### Basic Information:

**Scientific Name** – *Geochelone sulcata*

**Natural Habitat** – These tortoises inhabit sub-saran Africa, in some of the driest places on earth. Their range is in red on the map.

**Size** – Males can grow up to and over 30” in shell length and average more than 120 pounds, the largest reaching slightly over 200 pounds. Females tend to be smaller, averaging ~ 22” and ~ 75 pounds.

**Lifespan** – expect from 30 - 50 years for a healthy animal

**Diet** – Sulcata tortoises need very little protein or fat, and lots of fiber in their diet. We do not recommend using commercial tortoise diets because they are largely comprised of soy protein. A diet of mostly orchard/prairie hay, grasses, clover, dandelions, edible flowers, and cactus pads is ideal. Collards, kale, turnip greens can be fed in moderation, as well as squashes, carrots and other vegetables. The bulk of their diet should consist of hay and grasses.

In the wild, spur tortoises get most of their moisture from their diet and condensation on their skin at night. 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 during the summer and less during the cooler months.

### Housing:

Sulcata tortoises may start out as tiny hatchlings, but they get large fairly quickly. It is unrealistic to put a baby in a pen large enough for an adult, but you should definitely be planning ahead.

Smaller tortoises can be kept in aquariums or pens such as cement mixing tubs or large storage bins. Long, short enclosures work best, providing more floor space than a conventional tall aquarium. In addition to paper, play sand and peat moss mixed together can provide a good substrate which allows burrowing. With larger animals, you can use hardwood or cypress mulch as a substrate in addition to the sand/peat mix. 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.

As your tortoise grows, you will need to provide larger enclosures, and eventually it will need to go outdoors. They can be kept indoors if you have a room to devote to them, but their smell will eventually take over your house without extreme measures being taken! Outdoor pens must have an underground barrier along every wall or your sulcata will burrow under in record time. We recommend at least 10 inches of barrier underground. Sulcata tortoises will test fences by pushing and digging, and larger specimens have been known to knock down fences and tear through screens. 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. Be cautious of temperatures below 70 at night in moist areas, mid 60's in dry areas.

### **Lighting and Heating:**

Design your enclosure large enough to provide a temperature range for your animal. Your tortoise needs an ambient temperature around 80-90°F during most of the year. A hot spot should be provided which reaches about 95-100°F. Temperatures can drop into the low 70'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 thermoregulate 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.

### **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.

### **Sources:**

De Vosjoli, Philippe, Popular Tortoises. Mission Viejo, CA: Advanced Vivarium Systems, 1996.  
[www.avsbooks.com](http://www.avsbooks.com)

Gurley, Russ, The African Spurred Tortoise *Geochelone sulcata* in Captivity. Lanesboro, MN: Taxon Media Distributors, 2002. <http://www.ttpg.org>

Kaplan, Melissa, Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection, Sulcata Tortoises (updated Sept. 22, 2003).  
<http://www.anapsid.org/sulcata.html>, 1996.

Wilson, Richard and Robyn., The care and Breeding of the African Spurred Tortoise *Geochelone sulcata*. London, England, Carapace Press, 1997. <http://www.vidi-herp.com>

**For a more detailed information, please read our advanced care sheets at [www.grare.org/library/care.html](http://www.grare.org/library/care.html)**