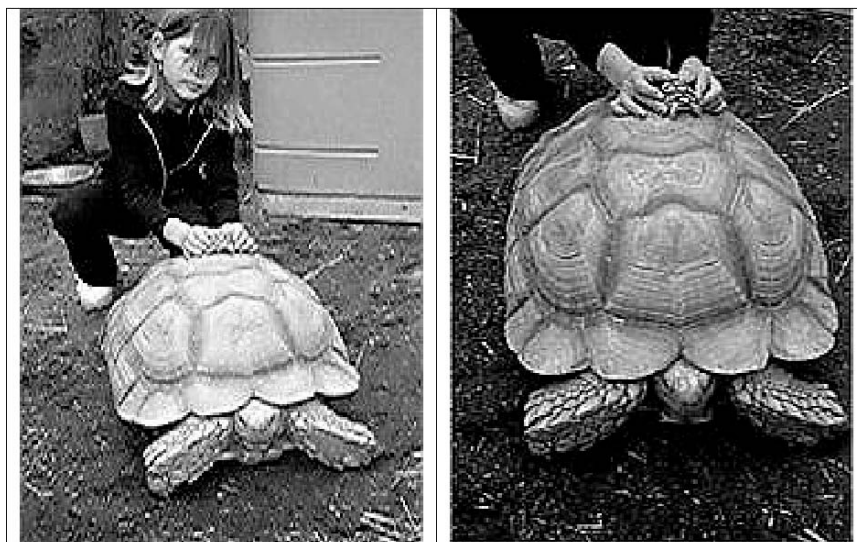


So You Think You Want A Sulcata?

Sulcata Tortoises are popular pets right now -the hatchlings are cute and relatively inexpensive. However, pet stores frequently give out faulty care advice, and there are certain widespread misconceptions about these tortoises. Here is what you need to know to determine whether or not a sulcata is the right pet for you.



This little girl is holding a hatchling sulcata in her hands atop the shell of a full-grown adult sulcata.

Adult Size/Weight: Sulcata are the third-largest tortoise species in the world! Only Galapagos and Aldabra tortoises are larger. A sulcata can easily reach 15 inches in shell length and weigh up to 75 pounds by the time it is 10 years old. Basically, it will be the size and weight of a good-sized boulder, with mobility and a mind of its own. Sulcata continue to grow throughout their lives and may eventually reach a final length of 2 feet and well over 100 pounds in weight.

Proper Diet: Sulcata torts are grazers that require a high-fiber, high-calcium, low-protein diet. About 80% of their diet should come from grazing on grasses and edible weeds, with the remaining 20% coming from dark leafy greens (dandelion, collards, and mustards). Do not feed your sulcata tortoise a steady diet of produce, fruit, or thawed frozen veggies – it can lead to kidney and liver damage! Produce is too high in protein and fruit of any type is too high in sugar and water for sulcata. Sulcata require large amounts of calcium to grow healthy bone and shell, so a calcium supplement is mandatory. We recommend Repti-Cal or plain calcium carbonate (sold in feed stores).

Water: Tortoises do require water! If your tortoise won't voluntarily drink from a shallow water dish, you should soak it in warm shallow (no deeper than the base of its throat) water for at least 10 minutes at a time. Hatchlings (babies) must be soaked at least once daily since they are at the greatest risk for dehydration. As your tortoise gets larger, it can be soaked less frequently

Housing/Enclosures: Sulcata torts are native to sub-Sahara Africa, so they DO NOT hibernate during the winter! They must be kept warm and relatively dry year-around. In New Mexico, sulcata tortoises thrive as long as the tortoise's enclosure is kept dry and not allowed to drop below 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Sulcata can develop respiratory illnesses if they are consistently exposed to cold and damp conditions. Tortoise tables are suggested for larger juveniles (plans for such tables can be found on the Internet). Adult sulcata require a securely walled outdoor pen and a heated, well-insulated shed for shelter at night or during cold or inclement weather.

Other things you should know about sulcata tortoises:

1. Tortoises can live a very long time -- up to 80 years is not uncommon -- so purchasing one is truly a lifetime commitment.
2. Tortoises, like most reptiles, require special enclosures, UV lamps, heat lamps, hide boxes, and vitamin/mineral supplements to keep them healthy. Make sure you can afford to buy and maintain all of this extra equipment when you buy a reptile pet.
3. Zoos cannot afford to take in unwanted exotic pets, so don't count on giving your adult tortoise to the local zoo when it's too big for you to handle. Sulcata are not native to the United States, so you should never release one into the wild, either. Contact Turtle Homes (see link below) if you need to give up your tortoise.
4. You cannot keep a sulcata small by keeping it a small aquarium or by under-feeding it, and in fact, both of these actions are cruel.
5. Sulcata have been known to dig themselves burrows if they are not adequately housed. These burrows can be over 20 feet long and six to eight feet deep. Sulcata are very strong and can push through many types of fencing, so secure walls are mandatory for adult tortoises.

Web Sites to Visit for More Information:

www.sulcata-station.org – Sulcata Station
www.anapsid.org – Reptile & Amphibian Information Collections
www.chelonia.org – The World Chelonian Trust
www.tortoise.org – The California Turtle and Tortoise Club

Recommended Reading:

The Practical Encyclopedia of Keeping and Breeding Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles
by A.C. Highfield (1996, Carapace Press)

The Care and Breeding of the African Spurred Tortoise Geochelone sulcata
by Richard and Robyn Wilson (1997, Carapace Press)