

Basic Aquatic Turtle Care Sheet

Slider, Cooters, Redbellies, Painteds, Map, and Chicken Turtles

by Katrina Smith

Do you have a red-eared slider or other aquatic turtle, or are you thinking of getting one? Not sure of how to care for it? The information here is to help you get started in the world of aquatic turtles. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Some recommended websites and books can help you learn more.

For most aquatic turtles, a good book to have on hand is Red-Eared Sliders (Animal Planet Pet Care Library) from TFH Publications (2011), available in some Petco stores and at Amazon.com.

WARNING: Any reptile has the potential to carry salmonella. Always wash hands after handling a turtle or touching any equipment that comes into contact with the turtle or the enclosure. In most states, it is illegal to release a pet turtle, particularly a red-eared slider or non-native turtle.

Aquatic turtles, such as sliders, painteds, redbellies, cooters, chicken turtles, map turtles, and terrapins all need the same basic supplies: **Large tank, basking spot, basking light (heat light), UVB light, filter, food, siphon, and hiding spots.**

Tank/Pond: For adult aquatic turtles, a 40 gallon breeder aquarium or LARGER is preferred, with outdoor ponds in enclosed yards being ideal. Female aquatics in particular need ponds in yards due to their large adult size. An adult female slider needs AT LEAST a 75-gallon tank, and an adult male slider needs from a 40-gallon to a 75-gallon tank, depending on his size. Rubbermaid stock tanks are cheaper than aquariums, and cost less than a dollar per gallon. They come in 50, 100, 150, and 300 gallon sizes, and most farm supply stores sell them. They aren't as pretty as aquariums, but they can be decorated, and they're easier to move if needed.

For juvenile aquatic turtles, a ten-gallon to forty-gallon tank is needed. Although a ten-gallon is acceptable for new hatchlings, depending on the individual animal (but NO turtle should live permanently in a ten gallon aquarium or even a 20-gallon aquarium), it's best to start with the largest size possible. A 20-gallon tank should last about a year or two with a hatchling before the turtle outgrows it.

Water depth should be AT LEAST as deep as the shell is long, although it CAN be much deeper. Indoor ponds and aquariums require a haul-out spot (also called a basking spot), a heat light over a basking spot, a UVB light (such as Reptisun 5.0) over the basking spot, a high-powered filter, and occasionally a water heater (depending on how cold your room is). Most households do not need a tank heater so long as the turtles can get under a basking spot whenever they choose. A heat light – at one end only - is a MUST indoors! You don't want to overheat a hatchling or small turtle, but there should be a light over the basking spot to provide a thermogradient. A simple household incandescent (not a coil) light bulb works fine for a heat light – the wattage will depend on the size of the turtle and how close the light is to the basking spot.

Outdoor ponds must be in an **escape-proof yard or the pond itself must be escape-proof**. Outdoor winter hibernation is allowed depending on the size of the pond, the species involved, and your winter temperatures. Generally, you'll need at least 300 gallons to allow hibernation. Turtles can be added for the first time to an outdoor pond between mid-May and mid-September, depending on your location, so they have time to acclimate before winter sets in.

Filter: External canister filters are more expensive than over-the-tank filters, but do a better job, and are worth the money in the long run. Small submersible filters will work for very small juvenile turtles, but the turtle will quickly outgrow those. A filter is a must for indoor turtles!

Basking Spot: An aquatic turtle needs a place where he can climb out of the water completely to dry off and warm up under a heat lamp and UVB light. I do not recommend stacking rocks or piling up gravel for a basking spot. This takes up too much room in the water, and rocks can lead to abrasions on the shell, which can then lead to infection. Floating cork bark is one alternative, and can be purchased on-line or at specialty aquarium stores. "Turtle Docks" are pre-formed floating basking sites that attach to the aquarium glass with suction cups. These can be purchased in pet stores or on-line. For large adult sliders, you might want to consider a home-made basking spot made of cork bark attached to a PVC frame, or Plexiglass attached to a frame. A simple basking spot can be made from pieces of plastic egg crate louvre (also sold as light diffuser, sold at home improvement stores) and electrical zip ties.

For indoor turtles, make sure that a light is on over the tank for 14 hours a day, to simulate summer hours.

Recommended foods: NOTE: AQUATIC TURTLES ONLY EAT IN THE WATER

Feed hatchlings daily. Turtles that are roughly 3-5 inches can be fed every other day. Very large adults can be fed three times a week. Offer an amount of pellets roughly the size of the turtle's head. Greens can be offered at any time. Turtles are great at begging, so they may always seem hungry.

- Commercial pellets found in most pet stores or on-line such as Zoo Med, Mazuri, Omega One, and Reptomin, or Turtle Brittle from <http://www.enasco.com/prod/Home>. It's best to mix two or more types of pellets, if possible, for complete nutrition.
- Greens should be offered occasionally (Romaine or leaf lettuces, collards, dandelion, etc., but no iceberg lettuce). Thin slices of veggies such as sweet potato and squashes can be used, too.
- Earthworms, insects, and occasional treats of pieces of plain COOKED meat such as shrimp, chicken or fish are acceptable as part of the diet. Never offer raw meat.
- For juvenile turtles that won't eat, try frozen "blood worms" (mosquito larvae) sold in little packs in the fish food section of most pet stores. Small crickets and pieces of earthworms are often readily accepted by stressed-out, newly acquired turtles.

Siphons: You'll need a siphon to change the water, usually every other week or two. I recommend the Python siphon, available in most pet stores or from Drs. Smith and Foster. It hooks up to the bathroom sink or outside faucet and drains and fills the tank without you ever having to touch the water or needing a bucket. Again, these are a bit expensive, but they last for years and make cleaning a large tank much, much easier. For very large tanks or indoor ponds, a small pond pump or utility pump and two hoses can drain 100 gallons in about 5 minutes.

Hiding Spots: Turtles enjoy having an area where they can feel safe from predators. Artificial silk plants, from the dollar store, Wal-Mart, or a craft store, can be put into the water to act as hiding spots and to add color to the tank. A dollar store silk plant works just as well as a hiding spot than an expensive plastic plant from a pet store. Rinse the plant well and let it soak in water over night before adding it to the tank.

Many supplies, such as a "Turtle Dock" for basking (attaches to the sides of the cage with suction cups), Reptisun 5.0 UVB lights, food, and a siphon can be ordered on the Internet. Websites include Drs. Foster and Smith <http://www.drsofostersmith.com> (or call 1-800-381-7179 to request a catalog).

If you just brought home your turtle, it may not eat for two or three days due to stress. However, if you have a basking light, clean water, and a hide spot, and your turtle won't eat after three days, it could be sick. Check at www.anapsid.com or with your local reptile club to see if there is a veterinarian in your area that will see turtles.

Recommended Websites:

<http://www.turtleforum.com>

<http://www.austinsturtlepage.com/>

<http://www.chelonia.org/Articles/basiccarebasking.htm>

<http://www.turtlepuddle.org/>

<http://www.matts-turtles.org> Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society

<http://www.angelfire.com/il3/janice/pondconstruction/construction.html>

shows how to build a pond and has links to ponding sites

Captive Care of North American Water Turtles by Richard Lunsford can be downloaded for free from <http://www.lulu.com/shop/richard-lunsford/captive-care-of-north-american-water-turtles/ebook/product-17551523.html>

Turtle Facts the Pet Store May Have Forgotten to Tell You

- Sliders and other aquatics can live 20 years or more, and some individuals have lived over 60 years.
- Female sliders, maps, cooters, terrapins, and painted turtles grow larger than males, and female sliders can reach 10-12 inches, while males reach 6-8 inches. Painted turtles and map turtles get slightly smaller than sliders, and cooters and redbellies get slightly larger than sliders.
- Adult male sliders, cooters, and painted turtles have much longer front nails and longer, thicker tails than females.
- Size affects sexual maturity more than age.
- You can determine gender when a slider's shell is roughly 4 - 4.25 inches long. Incubation temperatures determine gender, so if the breeder knows the incubation temperatures, the gender can be predicted, but not known for certain, before this size.
- For painted turtles, gender is usually evident by 3 inches, and for cooters or redbellies, by 5 inches.
- Indoor turtles don't HAVE to hibernate during the winter, but most aquatic turtles CAN hibernate in outdoor ponds if the pond is deep enough. Hibernation is a process that has specific temperatures over a period of time - it doesn't happen over night and doesn't happen at room temperatures.
- Turtles don't always need "company", "a buddy", or "a friend" to be happy. One turtle is just fine by himself in a tank. In fact, he's probably happier by himself because most indoor tanks are too small for two turtles. If the tank is too small, turtles will fight each other. In fact, there's no guarantee that any two adult turtle will get along in a captive environment.
- It is illegal to release a pet turtle into "the wild" or into native waters. A backyard pond should be fenced in to prevent a pet turtle from escaping.
- Red-Eared Sliders are not native to MD or the mid-Atlantic area. However, because so many pet sliders have been released, they can be found in most of our area, and could be out-competing native turtles for resources.
- Not all veterinarians will (or are even qualified to) see turtles, although a yearly check-up is a good idea for your pet turtle. Please contact MATTS or your local reptile society if you need help finding a qualified veterinarian.