

## Basic Information on Sulcata Tortoise



The sulcata tortoise, *Centrochelys sulcata*, is native to North Central Africa. They are sometimes referred to as spurred, African spurred, and African spur thigh tortoises. The largest African mainland tortoise and the third largest tortoise in the world, they can reach 33 inches and weigh over 100 pounds. Hatchlings are about 2 inches long, but grow very rapidly in the first ten years. The growth-rate slows after that, but they continue growing their entire life, which can be 50-70 years.

### Handling The Tortoise

Once you get your new pet home, give it a few days to acclimate to its new surroundings before handling it. It may spend the first few days tightly squeezed into its shell, coming out only when alone. After a few days, it will begin to come out and explore its surroundings. Place the cage in a quiet room so the sulcata tortoise doesn't get stressed from excessive stimuli. Always use two hands to pick up your tortoise and remember to support its feet to make it feel more secure. Tortoises get very stressed when allowed to "swim" in air. **Remember: Always wash your hands directly after handling any reptile.** Germs like *Salmonella* can easily be transferred from a reptile to your hands.

### Enclosure

Sulcatas can be very active and like to roam freely in a large enclosure. They like to climb, dig, and burrow into the ground to escape the heat.

Young sulcata tortoises can be raised indoors in a large enough enclosure that they can remain active. Indoor enclosures should include:

- A humid hiding area - to help satisfy their need to burrow - the humidity is essential to grow a smooth shell.
- Flat rocks - to help file the nails down.
- Forest Floor by Zoomed - makes a great substrate for indoor enclosures.

Due to their size, adult sulcata tortoises will eventually need to be kept in a large, enclosed outdoor area. In addition to a humid hiding area and flat rocks, outdoor enclosures should include:

- Soils that are not tainted with chemicals or fertilizers.
- Walls that are 24 inches above ground and a minimum of 12 inches below ground. Wire fences should not be used since Sulcatas like to climb and could fall on their back.

### Water + Soaking

Though they get most of their water from the foods they eat, sulcata tortoises should have a shallow, low-sided water dish in their enclosures. Clean and refill daily. Remember to dechlorinate all water a sulcata tortoise comes into contact with.

To remain hydrated - sulcatas must soak a few times a week. Fill a cat litter pan (reserved for this use) with warm, not hot, dechlorinated water up to the lower shell (plastron) of the tortoise. Let them soak for about 10 minutes. Be sure they are thoroughly dry before returning them to their enclosure.

### Light + Heat

Indoors, sulcata tortoises can be maintained at normal room temperatures: 68° to 80°F. They should also have a basking area heated by an overhead light or heat emitter. This spot should be in the 100° range. (Use a thermometer to be sure.)

Like most diurnal, herbivorous reptiles, they need a UVB light in their indoor enclosures to help them properly process the calcium in their diets. The light should be hung no more than 12 inches above the tank. There should be no glass or plastic between the light and the tortoise since they block the ultraviolet light of the bulb. Keep lights on 12 to 14 hours a day, and turn off all light and heat sources at night.

### Diet

A sulcata tortoise is basically a cow with a shell. Like a cow, their diet is high in fiber and low in protein, and they will graze and forage for hours during the day.

Seriously, though, pesticide and chemical-free grass should form the bulk (75%) of a captive sulcata's diet. Fresh-cut Bermuda grass, *Cynodon dactylon*, is a great choice and is even historically native to Africa. When the weather permits, you can take your tortoise outside to graze on the grass. (Never leave the tortoise outside unattended.)

Various species of clover are excellent for sulcata tortoises, who enjoy the leaves and flowers of the plant (pesticide and chemical-free). As with grass, you can take your tortoise outside for clover if it grows naturally near you. In addition to the exposure to sunlight, the turtle will also get a bit of exercise.

Older sulcatas can also eat Orchard Grass Hay, but some of the grasses and hays are too tough for hatchling and juveniles whose jaws are not as powerful. Instead, offer "spring mix" which includes a variety of greens. (No iceberg lettuce.)

The water and oxalic acid content of greens like collard, mustard, and turnip greens can be detrimental to the long-term health of sulcatas; offer these foods once per week at the most. Feed carrot tops, radish tops, and parsley in small quantities. (Oxalic acid affects calcium absorption.)

Variety ensures your sulcata receives all of the vitamins and minerals he needs. Though the bulk of a sulcata's food should be grass, you can offer occasional treats like fruit and flowers. Try hibiscus flowers, dandelion flowers, and roses. Fruits are very high in water and sugar, but you can offer a strawberry, a bite of melon or a bit of tomato occasionally. (Notice these are VERY small quantities.) The sulcata loves these items, which you can use as a lure when you need to coax the big turtle to move.

Sulcatas get all of the protein they need from the grasses and other plants in their diet, so never give your sulcata animal-based proteins, including insects, fish or mice. Legumes, nuts, and beans have too much protein and should be avoided. Never feed cooked, prepared, or processed human foods since they will invariably have too much protein, sugar, salt and fat for your pet tortoise.

Recommended prepared foods include Zoomed Grassland Tortoise Food and ExoTerra European Tortoise Food.

### Supplements

Multivitamins and calcium supplements with D3 are a great way to fill in the gaps and are highly recommended.

**Please note:** The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only.  
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