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Box Turtle Care

Box turtles are one of the best reptiles to keep for beginners (especially as adults). If these animals are given the proper care, they can live essentially the lifespan of a human being. Box turtles can live 40-50 years, with some reaching 100. Box turtles are named "Box" due to the hinged front undershell, or plastron. If disturbed or bumped, box turtles will withdraw their head and legs into their shell and close their hinge. They can close up tighter than a box. In captivity, they do not tend to use this instinctive behavior when handled gently and not dropped.

Captivity requirements for box turtles require integrating their natural environment with a practical natural setup. Adequate diet, water, lighting, temperature, cage, and flooring must be provided.

Care in Captivity

Diet:

In the wild, box turtles eat a diet of mainly land snails. They also eat various insects, slugs, earthworms, and vegetation. Dandelion leaves and various flowers seem to be a particular favorite. In captivity, they should be fed as much of the foods as possible as they would eat in the wild. This may entail stocking up on dandelions and leaves during the summer to freeze for the winter months. Some flower stores are more than happy to donate their dying unsold flowers in the winter as well. Bait shops sell earthworms and crickets (also sold in pet stores).

Young turtles have special requirements for calcium as their shells are rapidly growing. It is necessary to supplement with dietary calcium in order to meet their needs in captivity. Crushed up Tums or Rep-Cal (without vitamin D) work well for supplements. Young turtles should get calcium supplements 2-3 times weekly. A practical recommended diet is thawed frozen mixed vegetables mixed with a green leafy vegetable (i.e. kale, collared, mustard, dandelion, or turnip greens).

Note: Head lettuce should not be fed due to its low nutritional value. **DO NOT LET TURTLES EAT ONLY ONE PARTICULAR FOOD ITEM OR NUTRITIONAL DEFORMITIES ARE LIKELY TO DEVELOP.** Doming of the scutes on the upper shell (carapace) will occur if only insects or earthworms are eaten.

Never feed dog or cat food. Offer a small amount of food daily that will be completely consumed. Variety is everything. Avoid toxic flowers, such as oleander and marigolds.



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Temperature:

Box turtles should be maintained in a temperature range of 75-85 degrees Fahrenheit. Nighttime temperatures should drop approximately 5 degrees. A temperature gradient should be maintained by placing the heating source on one end of the cage. Under-the-tank heating pads on low with indoor/outdoor carpet or cypress mulch does well to maintain adequate temperatures. Water can be added to cypress mulch to increase the humidity if necessary. Ideal humidity is 60-80 percent.

Lighting:

For those housed indoors, the most efficient light source is the Exo Terra Solar Glo. It is a mercury vapor bulb that emits heat, UVB, and UVA. UV light has multiple benefits, including calcium metabolism and improved appetite and activity. Proper calcium metabolism helps protect against metabolic bone disease. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's directions when installing the light. Use a clamp lamp with a ceramic fixture to prevent melting. The fixture should be carefully secured to avoid being bumped and breaking the filament or starting a fire. Make sure to replace the bulb yearly and remember that glass and plastic blocks UV light. If needed, a red bulb can be added for nighttime temperature drops. Timers for regulating light and temperature simulate the day/night cycle for these turtles.

UV lights are not replacements for natural sun but are the best thing available. For those living indoors, provide them time outside for several hours each week. A plastic children's swimming pool, with a hole cut in the bottom and covered with mesh, works well as a temporary shelter. Flip the pool over grass and stake it to the ground. The turtle can move between the spot with the sun coming through and shaded areas. Avoid putting turtles in direct sunlight with no shade and they will be likely to heat stroke. Never put outside in a glass aquarium. If your turtle lives outside, ensure there is a burrow for him to retreat to during the heat of the day.

Water:

Fresh water should be provided every day as these turtles often soil their water. An inch of water is an adequate depth. The bowl must be large enough for the turtle to be able to totally submerge in and should be easy to get in and out of.

Caging:

A box turtle can comfortably live in a 20-gallon or a larger aquarium. The turtle should be provided with a place or two to hide. Deep mulch, shoeboxes, carpets, and newspapers



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work well. Water and food should be kept on the opposite side of the heat source. Spring and fall outdoor enclosures can be made as long as a shaded area is provided. Water should be available at all times. Cage flooring can be artificial turf, cypress mulch, or newspaper. Keeping the cage clean and dry is important in preventing disease.

Common Diseases:

Inner ear abscesses, malnutrition, metabolic bone disease, internal parasites, and trauma.

Always wash your hands after handling turtles or cleaning the cage. Salmonella bacteria are normal flora in many turtle intestines.