

Care For Your Pet Turtle

Turtles are fascinating and interesting animals and like all reptiles, they are cold blooded so require the sunshine for heat and health. The turtles that will be found in shops in the UK will invariably be inhabitants of North America where the summers are sunny and warm and the winters can be bitterly cold. In America turtles go through a hibernation period when they shut down for winter, however it is possible to keep turtles in a tank all year round without hibernating them.

Before choosing your animal you must be aware that turtles have very long lives and the cute little green turtles get really big - over 1Kg and 30cm long - they grow quickly. In 4 years time the little green turtle will be 20cm long and will need a 1.5 metre enclosure. Please consider how you will manage your pet in years to come. There are hundreds of unwanted Sliders and Cooters looking for homes - mostly unsuccessfully.

Remember it is illegal to release unwanted turtles into the wild and although some survive, most suffer a miserable death. In the UK turtles released into the wild will not breed.

When you choose your animal check that its shell is clean and undamaged and each leg should be free of cuts and grazes. The eyes should be bright and clear and it should not have any mucus around its mouth and nose. Also ensure that when it swims it is evenly buoyant and can swim up and down in the water.

Turtles should have 80 litres of water for every 5cm of shell length as a minimum. Water depth should be about twice the length of the shell. All turtles require good quality basking; this means a source of warm Infra Red (IR) light such as an incandescent flood lamp and a source of UVb light for important Vitamin D synthesis. It is possible to buy a lamp that provides both qualities called a Mercury Vapour Bulb (MVB). New lighting products are being developed all the time, so do ask your shop for help in choosing. To bask the turtle needs to be able to climb out onto a dry area under the lamp. The basking spot should not get any warmer than 35deg C. and be comfortably warm to the touch. The basking spot should allow the turtle to move in and out of the warm spot as it manages its body temperature.

If the tank is kept in a house then the water may not need heating as the heat provided by the lamp may be sufficient. The water should get to above 25°C during the day for hatchlings and 22°C for adults. A thermostatically controlled heater will be required if it is too cool. As turtles get bigger they can destroy glass enclosed heaters and thermostats so take care with the kind you provide and how you position it. The enclosure should be open topped to reduce respiratory problems but remember that they are great escape artists.

Turtle enclosures get dirty quite quickly so filtration is required. Keepers have learned that an external filter capable of dealing with twice the volume of the water in the tank is about the right size. Remember to monitor flow rate and clean the filter media when it slows down. Water should always be clear and clean. In

addition a weekly water change of about 20% is good practice. Tap water can be used directly provided that chlorinated water is allowed to stand to let the chlorine evaporate. Rain water is excellent. Turtles are messy feeders and experienced keepers do not offer any substrate. Gravel could trap food or be swallowed so is generally avoided.

The diets of all turtles covered here are very similar and a common basic diet can be considered. Feeding is straight forward with youngsters being fed once a day an amount equating to the volume of their head if it were hollow. This is reduced to once every other day after 6 months. If the growth is too fast they will get lumpy shells.

For hatchlings use a staple diet of specially formulated turtle pellets, supplemented with a mix of natural foods such as worm, mussel, shrimp, trout, bloodworm, woodlice, and mealworm; these are important weekly treats. As the animal grows, try koi pellets and cichlid pellets for variety. The Sliders and Cooters despite their reputation develop into being mostly vegetarian when adult, so having plants in the enclosure is vital. Duck weed is especially loved.

All turtles will try and catch fish if they are in the enclosure.

Turtles need long periods of warmth before they can breed and their eggs need incubation for success.

There is more information on the following web sites
<http://www.thebhs.org/>
<http://www.terrapien-info.co.uk/caresheets.php>

All pets can carry sources of infection so please be aware of your hygiene. Always wash your hands after handling your pets. Young children should be especially careful and should be taught that turtles are not toys.