

Care of Mediterranean Tortoise Hatchlings

Housing - Although hatchlings will be in hibernation during the coldest part of the year, provision will still need to be made to keep them on cool wet days. Small hatchlings really need a heated vivarium with adequate UVB lighting but older ones can be kept in a warm enclosure with a UVB lamp to bask under. This artificial sun will encourage them to feed and the light it provides is as necessary as warmth.

UVB light produces vitamin D3 which enables calcium to be absorbed from their diet. The substrate of the vivarium can be a soil/sand mixture, tree bark or an area of each of these plus a gravel area to keep claws short. It should be deep enough for the hatchlings to bury in.

Outdoors - Hatchlings can go outside as soon as it is warm enough for them to feed out there. If they make straight for their shelter and stay there or bury themselves or remain inactive then it is probably not warm enough for them. This must not be confused with their habit of sheltering from the heat of the midday sun.

A weatherproof shelter must be provided and as they get older as much of the garden as possible should be given over to them although an escape-proof wall or fence is a must. A fence must be solid, not wire netting or glass, to avoid them continuously pacing the fence trying to get out. As they can see through netting or glass they will try to walk to the area beyond it but a solid wall or fence avoids this.

A heated conservatory or greenhouse is essential on wet or cool days but if you do not have one a glass cloche can be purchased from a garden centre for about £50. This can be raised on a row of bricks to provide access and a heat lamp suspended to provide warmth and light. The correct type of outdoor electrical fitting must of course be used.

Create an interesting environment with places to bury, climb and hide. Grow food plants in the outdoor enclosure to encourage browsing. A rockery is ideal as they enjoy climbing over the rocks and like basking in the sun in the shelter of the rocks. Many rockery plants will be enjoyed by tortoises such as sedums and other succulents.

Always bring the tortoises in at night for security reasons and to protect from foxes, cats and other predators. Make sure they cannot accidentally fall into a garden pond: Tortoises cannot swim.

Hibernation - Hatchlings can be hibernated quite safely and grow smoother shells if allowed to hibernate but give them a shorter period than adults. As an example, two year old hatchlings will benefit from a period of 10-12 weeks asleep.

Do not use hay or straw as this can cause respiratory problems. Shredded newspaper, well-dried leaves or other insulation materials can be used with one box placed inside a larger box and the gap between the two filled with newspaper, not forgetting the bottom.

Tortoises need approximately three weeks without eating before going into hibernation so that no undigested food remains in their stomach as this can rot and cause problems.

If the boxes are to be kept in a shed or garage make sure they are protected from mice and rats and the temperature must not be allowed to fall below + 5C (40F). Below this the fluid of the eyes can freeze resulting in blindness.

A copy of the Jackson Ratio is available from the [Tortoise Trust](#). This is a graph which shows the ideal length/weight of adult tortoises. It is used to assess their fitness before hibernation.

Feeding - Try to provide a diet which is as natural as possible. Incorrect diet causes soft or lumpy shells, and weak hatchlings.

Avoid the following at all costs:

- Cat and dog food (tinned and dried).
- Bread.
- Milk.
- Cheese.
- Cornflakes etc.
- Bananas can cause constipation and are addictive so should only be given very occasionally.

Also avoid peas, sweet corn and bean sprouts as these are too high in protein and will cause lumpy shells.

Correct Foods Include:

- Dandelion, sow thistle and other weeds in the same family such as cat's ears, hawkweed, hawkbits and hawkbeard.
- All clovers, trefoils and vetches.
- Mallow (leaves and flowers).
- Ivy-leaved toadflax.
- Bindweed (convolvulous).
- Plantains, sorrel, small sedums and other succulents.

Tortoises love the flowers and leaves of field poppies and also buttercups but give both of these in moderation as they can be toxic.

Lettuce and cucumber can occasionally be given but have very low nutritional value and should not form the staple diet.

Tomatoes, apples and other fruit can be given in small amounts only (not every day) as these cause rather wet droppings.

Never give raspberry or tomato pipe to hatchlings as these cause digestive problems.

Apple pips are poisonous so should always be removed.

Garden Plants which can be given include Russian Vine, ice plant (the butterfly bush), wallflowers, lupin leaves, aubretia, buddlia leaves, lilac leaves and honeysuckle leaves.

Food can be scarce when tortoises emerge from hibernation but it is always possible to find goosegrass (sweethearts) and open leaf buds on bramble bushes.

Tortoises will not eat everything on the "permitted" list but offer as much variety as possible.

A seed mix of tortoise weeds is available from Herbiseed, New Farm, Mire Lane, West End, Twyford, RG10 ONJ. Telephone 0118 934 9464 E-mail: info@herbiseed.com Web site: www.herbiseed.com. This mix contains seeds of many of the weeds tortoise would eat in the wild and can be sown directly onto the paddock or in a seed box to provide a continuous supply of fresh food, invaluable on a wet day when one is busy.

Remember the diet should be:

- Low in fat and oils.
- Rich in vitamins and minerals.
- High in fibre (very important).
- Vegetarian (very important).
- Adequate in moisture.

Do not overfeed hatchlings: In the wild food would not always be readily available and they would eat far less than those in captivity. Overfed hatchlings will grow too fast and have lumpy shells. Hatchlings fed on incorrect foods e.g. only lettuce and cucumber with no fibre, vitamins or calcium results in soft shells and weak bones.

To ensure that hatchlings are getting all the vitamins and minerals they require, regularly dust their food with a vitamin and mineral supplement such as Nutrobal or Vetark. These are obtainable by post from The Tortoise Trust or any reptile specialist pet store and have a long shelf life. Cuttlefish bone can also be given whole, to be gnawed which will keep the mouth trimmed or grated onto food. Cuttlefish alone will not provide sufficient calcium. Calcium carbonate can be purchased in powder form from a chemist and this can be sprinkled on picked foodstuffs and on growing weeds where it will be absorbed through the roots of the plants.

Foods need to have a calcium to phosphorous level of 2:1 although wild diets are often 10:1 or even 50:1 (dandelions and sow thistles have a calcium phosphorous levels of 3:1. Snail shells are often eaten in the wild which is another source of calcium.

Water should be available at all times. A shallow dish is best as tortoises like to wade in, but the water should be changed frequently and kept clean. Hatchlings can fall over on their backs on slippery surfaces so a flat stone or small flat piece of slate in the dish can guard against this.

Other information - Join a group such as the Tortoise Trust, British Chelonia Group or you may have a local tortoise club in your area such as ours. As well as providing useful advice they are invaluable if any problems arise.

Regular newsletters are sent and contact can be made with other tortoise owners in the area.

Always seek advice from an expert if your tortoise appears unwell or refuses to eat.

www.tortoiseclub.org

Hatchlings of both sexes can be kept together but will have to be separated as they attain maturity. Any number of females can be kept together but a pair of males may be aggressive towards each other although in a large garden this might not be a problem. If keeping a mixed sex group a ratio of at least two females to one male is advisable. If a single male and female are kept together the male will spend all his time chasing the female and she would spend her time trying to avoid him with the result neither of them would devote enough time to feed properly. The female could become stressed especially if she wanted to commence egg laying and with the constant attention of the male could sustain damage to her shell or rear legs.

Useful Addresses

The Tortoise Trust:
BM Tortoise
London
WC1N 3XX
E-mail : tortoisetrust@aol.com
Website: www.tortoisetrust.org

British Chelonia Group:
The Membership Secretary
British Chelonia Group
P.O.Box 1176
Chippenham
WILTS
SN15 1XB
Website: www.britishcheloniagroup.org.uk

Norfolk and Coe Tortoise Club:
The Norfolk and Coe Tortoise Club meets on the third Wednesday of each month. For dates and venue information, see our [club news page](#).
Website: www.tortoiseclub.org

Suffolk Tortoise Club:
The Suffolk Tortoise Club meets on the first Wednesday of the month at Moreton Hall Veterinary Centre, Easlea Road, Bury St. Edmunds, at 8pm.
Tel. 01284 747000 (all ages are welcome).

. With thanks to club member Marion for this article