

# Caring for your Eastern Hermanns Tortoise (*Testudo hermanni boettgeri*)

Copyright © 2003/2008 – Herp-Titude.com

Updated 4/21/08

The Hermanns tortoise is a very good beginner tortoise and has a wonderful personality. They are herbivores and consume a wide variety of flowers, leaves, and weeds in the wild. Hermanns tortoises can grow to be anywhere from 6 inches (males) to 8" (females) and can live to be 100 years old. It takes a real commitment to have a tortoise, since they will end up outliving most of us.

## **Time to adjust to new surroundings:**

When you first bring your new little one home, have their enclosure "move in ready" before their arrival. Once in the enclosure, just allow it time to adjust to its new surroundings. This can take up to a couple of weeks for some. Continue to feed, water and clean enclosure on a daily basis, but try not to handle the tort during this time. They will awake when it is time to do so and they will certainly sleep when they are tired.

## **Housing Indoors:**

If your tortoise is under a year old you can use a variety of enclosures that will be suitable; 2' x 2' Rubbermaid container or even a homemade style unit made from a dresser drawer works quite well. Preferably something they cannot see out the sides of. If you must use a glass terrarium for a temporary enclosure, we suggest putting paper around the sides so they cannot see out the sides. Tortoises are notorious for wanting to reach the other side if they can see it.

If your tortoise is over a year old, you will need to have an enclosure larger than 2' x 2'. Home Depot and Lowes have cement tubs that seem to work really well and they are very sturdy. Rubbermaid and Sterlite also have some great tubs that work quite well. You can also build a simple enclosure using plywood (don't use cedar or pine).

## **Substrate:**

For hatchlings (less than 6 months old): we use paper towels. It is easy to clean up and they can't accidentally ingest something they shouldn't.

Older than 6 months: We have used a combination of 70% "super soil" (organic soil) and 30% play sand. We sift out the larger chunks in the "super soil" using a wire sifter, and then mix in the play sand. You can also use a little bed a beast in the mix. We also use a magnetic bar to run across the soil mixture after preparation. This will pick up any metal objects (if there are any) that happened to be in the bag of Super Soil.

Recently we started using coconut bark. It is very similar if not the same as bed-a-beast. Mist with water "lightly" a couple times a day.

We also scatter Orchard Grass Hay or Bermuda Grass Hay around the enclosure (not under the basking area). They like to hide under this and they will also eat it. For the little ones, we scissor cut the orchard grass hay.

Humidity: Whether using paper towels as a substrate for the little ones OR soil, it is important to keep a "humid hide" area for all tortoises. For the little ones indoors, I mist their area a couple times a day. I keep a spray bottle filled with water handy to accomplish this. For the tortoises kept outdoors, I mist down their area around noon time each day, with a common garden hose, keeping humidity in their area. There are many people now who feel that keeping some humidity in their area, will prevent "pyramiding" of the shell. I believe this to be very true and since doing this have not had any issues with pyramiding!

## **Hide areas:**

For hatchlings (less than one year old): amazingly enough, we have found that something as simple as a hand towel works quite well as a hide. Just fold over the hand towel and place on one side of the enclosure and the torts will tuck themselves into it. Other things you can use are:

- 12 pack coke cardboard holders. Just make sure they have easy access to get inside and replace once soiled.
- Kitty pan tray: cut a mouse hole out from the top and turn it upside down.
- Cardboard plant holders: cut in half and place on the ground. They only thing about these is, the tort will try to climb it and possibly topple over. They may not be able to "right themselves" if they don't have a good "foothold" to turn over.

- Plastic plant holders: same idea, just cut in half. These are a little safer since they can't climb the outside walls of these.
- Small cardboard shoeboxes: cut a mouse hole out and turn upside down.

For yearlings and older:

- We use the large kitty pan trays, turned upside down as well as the large plant holders cut in half.
- Mist lightly inside of the hide.

### **Basking:**

Providing a basking area is essential so the tortoise can bask to digest their food. We have all our basking areas on a regulator that will auto shut off between 88 & 90 degrees. The cool end of the enclosure is 75 degrees.

We use ceramic heat emitters for the basking spot and keep them on 24/7 (for hatchlings), this way the torts are still warm at night.

### **Lighting:**

A good UVB bulb of at least 5.0 should be placed above the enclosure no further than 12" away from your tortoise...8" to 10" away is even better. Lighting should be left on 12 – 14 hours daily.

### **Housing Outdoors:**

Provide a safe and secure environment outdoors, making sure it is predator proof. We use redwood fencing with the fencing buried a couple inches below the surface and then put a chicken wire protective cover over the top of it. You can also plant a variety of "edible" plants, flowers and weeds in the enclosure allowing the tortoise to graze. It is also good to have a "tort house" inside the enclosure so the tortoise can retreat to this. Placing slate in a couple locations will serve to help them "wear down" their claws and it is also useful for a basking location. Placing the enclosure in a sunny location is a must as well. Hermanns love to bask, but again, they will need a place to retreat to, to get out of the sun if they choose to. Make sure you have a water dish in this enclosure also. You can use a "plant saucer" buried down a bit so they can easily get in and out. If you are making a "hatchling enclosure", don't use a pie tin (they are too deep). Use something like a coffee can lid in an area where there is no grass and a little shade so they can get to it easily.

We also use non-skid tape in the water saucers. We found it was easier for the tort to get in and out of the saucer using this.

### **Tipping Over: (upside down)**

Tipping over upside down does happen and can be caused by the tortoise trying to climb either up a wall, over something in the enclosure, another tortoise, etc. Most of the time the tortoise will not be able to right itself, especially if placed on paper towels where they cannot get a good foothold. We have heard many pet shops tell their customers "oh, they can flip themselves over". This is not always the case. If you see your tortoise topple upside down, please right him back over. If upside down too long, they can die. Especially if upside down under a basking area, or outside under the hot sun.

### **Water Dish:**

For hatchlings (0-6 months): No water dish is provided at this age, this is why we soak them daily (read below under soaking).

For hatchlings (6-12 months): We use the lid on a 3 lb coffee can (the plastic type). It is shallow and they won't drown.

For yearlings and older: We use many different types of water bowls. The key here is making sure it isn't too deep to where the tortoise will drown and also making sure the tortoise can get out.

Here are a few ideas for water dishes:

- The lid from a 3 lb. coffee can
- The lid from a 1 lb. coffee can
- Glazed ceramic plant saucers (shallow) (home depot has these and they are not expensive). The kind that you place under a potted plant to catch the water.
- We use non-skid tape on the inside, to ensure the tortoise could easily get out of the water dish.

### **Supplements:**

We supplement using:

- Cuttlebone: Cut some cuttlebone in small pieces and scatter a few pieces throughout the enclosure. Make sure to remove the paper backing on the cuttlebone. This can stay in the enclosure. For the little ones, we use a "cheese grater" to grate the cuttlebone into smaller pieces and then distribute in the enclosure.
- Calcium w/D3 for indoors: Three times a week on their salad (don't use if taking the tort outside)

- Calcium w/o D3 for outdoors: Three times a week on their salad
  - Multivitamin (Reptivite): One time weekly.
  - Tortoise Dust by T-Rex: Every day they are not getting calcium
- \* *We use Miner-All by Sticky Tongue Farms for the calcium supplement of choice.*

### **Soaking:**

For hatchlings (less than one year old): we soak daily for 5- 10 minutes. Use tepid water just deep enough to where the tortoise can bend their head down to drink.

For yearlings and older: we soak every 2 to 3 days for 5 - 10 minutes, even though we keep a water bowl in the enclosure at this age. Again, make sure the water isn't too deep and they can still bend their head down to drink.

Most times our tortoises will defecate and urinate while in their soak. The urine will also contain a white substance called "urates", this is perfectly normal and no need to panic when you see it.

We use a hand towel to dry them off thoroughly. This is a good bonding time also and the tortoises seem to really enjoy their "bath time" experience.

**\*The water level should NOT go above their chin or above the bottom where the carapace (top of shell) meets the plastron (bottom of shell). If you make sure they can bend their head downward to take a drink, they should be safe from drowning.**

**\*\*We use small plastic tupperware containers for our hatchling soak dishes and kitty pan trays for our larger hermanns.**

### **Bath Time:**

This is pretty much the same as soaking, but a little more detailed. Weekly on all tortoises we will rinse off their entire shell (carapace – top of shell), and then take a damp paper towel and gently wash off their underside (plastron). We also take a damp Q-tip and gently wash off their mouths. You would be surprised at how much will accumulate around their mouths.

Poopie Mouth – If it looks like poop around the mouth, it is! Tortoises will eat their own poop and other tort poop too! This is just the way it is. It doesn't harm them but looks gross.

### **Cage Cleaning:**

Cage hygiene is very important for the health of your tortoise. In our hatchling enclosures (we use paper towels) we change the paper towels daily. While they are in their soak is a good time to do this. As cleaning agents we use a variety of things: Healthy Habitats, Simple Green (diluted) or water and a little antibacterial soap.

For the yearling and larger, indoor enclosures we clean out the poop daily, wash the food and water dishes daily. Monthly we put in fresh substrate.

### **Diet:**

They are herbivores and consume a wide variety of flowers, leaves, and weeds in the wild. We grow edible flowers; leaves and weeds outside that are pesticide and herbicide free. We don't recommend picking your neighbors flowers though, since you can't be sure if they or someone else sprayed a poisonous product on it. When in doubt, don't. We also mix "grocery store bought" greens daily that consist of "no less" than five different types of greens in their salad. This provides a varied diet.

**Some of the greens the salad can include are:** dandelion, endive, escarole, mustard greens, turnip greens, bermuda grass, clover, watercress and cilantro.

\*Refrain from using Spinach, Swiss chard and Cabbage.

\*\*Sparingly feed Collards and kale.

**These are great to mix into the salad:** radicchio, bell pepper (red and green) cucumber, hibiscus, shredded carrot, optuntia cactus, shredded summer squash (uncooked), summer squash (cooked), pumpkin (cooked), sedum, edible wild flowers, and occasionally fruit (sliced apple without seeds, figs, mango, cantaloupe, etc.).

We cook the squash and pumpkin to where it is soft and slice it into bite size cubes.

### **Feeding:**

Feed once in the morning and supplement with Calcium. Do not feed for at least 4 hours before it is the end of day (bedtime). They need time to digest their food before going to bed for the night.

### **Tracking Growth/Weight:**

It will benefit both you and your tortoise to keep track of its weight and growth on a weekly basis if less than a year old.

We track yearlings once a month. This will help you not only see how fast your little one is growing, but if your tortoise isn't

doing too well, you will be able to see if it is losing weight as well. Just a simple chart/spreadsheet can be made showing the date, weight, size and comment section is helpful

#### **Vet Visits:**

It is a good idea to have your tortoise checked out by an experienced "herp vet". Not all vets are experienced with tortoises, so getting a qualified "herp vet" will come in handy. It would be a good idea to start looking before you need one also. There are a couple places on the Internet that do have vets listed and this is a good place to start.

- <http://www.herpvetconnection.com> – Herp Vets listed by State
- <http://www.arav.org/USMembers.htm> – Herp Vets listed by State

#### **Sick tortoise:**

There may come a time when you need to get medical attention for your tortoise. Don't delay in getting help for your tortoise if you suspect it isn't feeling well. Here are some common things to look for:

- Runny nose – It is common after a soak for them to have water coming from their nose. Try checking the nasal area prior to going into a soak. If it is runny or has mucus coming from the nose for several days, a vet should see your animal.
- Not eating - This could be caused by many things, but if your tortoise is losing weight and hasn't been eating for a couple days, then please take it to the vet.
- Runny stools: Could be caused by too wet of food or parasites. If the tortoise has a runny stool for more than a few days try changing the diet. Make sure you are feeding dark greens as listed above and dry the greens off thoroughly before feeding. If that doesn't help we suggest obtaining a fresh stool sample and have it tested by your vet for verification of parasites.

#### **Keep them safe:**

If you own dogs or cats, make sure they cannot get access to your tortoise or inside the enclosure. Dogs are known to be quite fascinated with anything that moves. These little guys will end up being "chew toys" to your dog if you don't keep an eye on things. Make sure your dog cannot get into the enclosure when you are not around and if you like having your tortoise roam in your house, make sure you are there to supervise if a dog is around. Cats have a tendency to "do their duty" in the enclosure if made assessable and will also be fascinated with some tortoises.

The main point here is to just keep an eye on things so no one gets hurt.

If you need to contact us with any questions or concerns you have, feel free to e-mail us at: [sales@herp-titude.com](mailto:sales@herp-titude.com). Most times we can respond to your e-mail within 24 hours.