

OUTDOOR TORTOISE CARE

Many tortoises can benefit from time outside during the warm hours in the summer months in the UK. Outdoor time can provide exposure to natural sunlight and the opportunity to exercise and forage. However UK summers are often cooler than those in your tortoise's natural habitat, so tortoises should be brought indoors if the temperature drops below ~20°C and always before it starts to get dark. Sadly many tortoises can become prey for neighbourhood dogs, cats and foxes, so keep this in mind when housing a tortoise outdoors. Also beware of other garden hazards such as lawnmowers, compost heaps or bonfires.

CREATING A TORTOISE ENCLOSURE

Having the tortoise loose in the garden is not advised unless they can be carefully supervised. The tortoise can escape by digging, hide, hibernate in inappropriate conditions or be attacked by other animals. We therefore recommend constructing an outdoor enclosure for your tortoise to keep them safe during their time outside. When building an enclosure, it is important to realise that tortoises can dig for up to a foot or more downwards to escape. Tortoises can also traumatise themselves on the sides of the run, so it is important to create a solid barrier so that the tortoise cannot see out of the run. Repetitive head trauma from escape attempts can lead to bony infection of the skull, which can be fatal. Covering the run with a mesh or similar will prevent predation and reduce the risk of theft while still allowing your tortoise the benefits of sunshine. However a shaded area should be provided for very hot days.

For cooler periods a shed section or greenhouse can be adapted to provide an additional heated area. In the heated area newspaper is recommended as a substrate. AVOID sand, gravel, wood shavings and cat litter, as these are not only difficult to clean, but can cause impaction if eaten on purpose or accidentally should the food become covered by these substrates.

Outside, a crop of grass, herbs and other non-toxic plants can be encouraged to grow to provide cover and food. Rocks (large ones) in the cage allow for basking. A hiding place is appreciated by all tortoises and should be available. An area to dig and hide under is required. Some thought to prevent collapse is needed. Constructing a hide of bricks and slate securely held together and filled with earth is a good idea. A cold frame is also useful made out of bricks and a sheet of glass, again securely held together. This provides a hot spot to heat the tortoise up quickly.

For smaller tortoises, a small secure pen can be made on legs, which can be moved around the garden to catch the sun. Feeding levels and type can be strictly regulated. When it is cold the tortoises can be brought into their inside accommodation. This pen can have natural substrate, climbing and hiding areas and a water source incorporated into the design.

For further information on tortoise care, see www.tortoisetrust.org and www.britishchelonigroup.org.uk