



Outdoor Russian Tortoise

A comprehensive guide on caring for your Russian tortoise kept outdoors

Enclosure

Russian tortoises typically reach 4-10 inches in length (depending on sex, females are larger than males). They will continue to grow throughout their lives, though growth slows with age. These tortoises are long-lived and can reach over 50 years of age with proper care. Russian tortoises are native to Southeastern Russia through Central Asia. They can be found in a variety of habitats including treeless grasslands and rock and scrub filled deserts. Russian tortoises do best when kept in **outdoor enclosures** with a minimum of 24-inch high walls



from the ground up to prevent escape. Russian tortoises are excellent climbers and escape artists! Do not put hides or other items near walls as those can assist your tortoise in escaping. Make sure the walls are smooth, without footholds, to prevent escape. In addition, Russian tortoises are excellent diggers! Therefore, walls will need to be built into the ground, at a depth of at least 12-inches. The minimum sized outdoor enclosure for a single Russian tortoise is 4 ft by 4 ft.

An appropriate outdoor enclosure will incorporate sunny spots and shady spots for the tortoise to reside. This allows them to warm up and cool down at their leisure. Plants are great to add to outdoor enclosures, but make sure that they are non-toxic plants for reptiles; Russian tortoises are herbivores and may attempt to eat the plants. The Tortoise Table (<https://www.thetortoisetable.org.uk/>) is a good resource for tortoise safe plants to use in your enclosure. Make sure that any plants used provide shade and are ones that tortoises can go underneath for cover. You can also use pre-made hides to provide cover for your tortoise as well as innumerable other options if you get creative.

When creating an outdoor tortoise enclosure the best way to make an appropriate layout is to remove grass from an area of about 20% of the enclosure to create a section of bare ground. If your lawn and soil is free from fertilizers and pesticides this is safe to do. The other 80% of the enclosure can be left as grass with other plants added.

Small to large flat rocks should be added to the enclosure, as tortoises will use them to keep their long nails trimmed.

Temperatures

Russian tortoises can handle a wide range of temperatures. Unless you want to avoid winter brumation, you will not need to bring your Russian tortoise indoors (unless you live in a location with extreme winters). Ensure that your tortoise is able to burrow down into the substrate to escape extreme temperatures. Depending upon your climate you may need to take extra precautions such as creating a roof on your enclosure to protect brumating tortoises from rain caused saturated soil.

Co-habitation

Unlike box turtles, Russian tortoises are not successfully communal species and do not do well in groups. They are best housed alone. If you do attempt to house together make sure there is plenty of space and ample hiding spots. Also be prepared to separate if they are not getting along. Russian tortoises that have shown aggression towards each other should not continue to be housed together. In the wild, Russian tortoises are solitary animals and usually only come together only to reproduce. If you do choose to co-habitat, leave for outdoors only.



Feeding & Supplements

Russian tortoises are herbivores. It important to also offer a variety of produce options to fulfill their nutritional needs. Good produce options to feed a Russian tortoise include leafy greens such as dandelion greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, collard greens, bok choy, and romaine. **Stay away from spinach and kale; they have negative impact on calcium uptake.** Additional vegetables that can be fed are: carrots, bell peppers, zucchini, squash, beets, yam, and peas. Fruit should not be a part of a Russian tortoise's diet, with the only exception being a *very rare* treat if you are inclined to do so.

The foods listed above are some suggestions of common foods fed out – they are not the only ones! Mix and match to see what your tortoise enjoys. Be aware that there are also plenty of commercial pellet foods available that can be offered with produce to provide a well balanced meal, though not all Russian tortoises take to these.

The Tortoise Table website also provides a helpful list of suitable produce for tortoises.

Hatchling and juvenile Russian tortoises should be fed every day and adults should be fed at least every other day.

If you are feeding your Russian tortoise a balanced diet including many nutritious leafy greens, they should not need very much supplemental calcium when kept outdoors, a sprinkling once a week or calcium without D3 will be sufficient. Providing a cuttlebone can also be a good source of calcium if your tortoise is interested. It is beneficial to give your Russian tortoise a sprinkling of a multivitamin such as ReptiVite or Miner-All once every week or two for well balanced health.

Water

Always give your tortoise access to water. A large, shallow saucer pan or water dish with approximately 2 inches of water for adults (less for younger tortoises) will allow the tortoise to soak and drink water in its enclosure. Water needs to be changed daily as they often drag debris into water and defecate in there. This is to prevent bacteria accumulation or unwanted harmful build up to occur in the bowl that could cause illness. Vegetables also provide hydration for tortoises.

Predation

If you live in an area where your yard is frequented by predators such as raccoons, skunks, or rats you will need to take extra precautions. One option is to make a lid for your enclosure out of chicken wire or hardware cloth. Increasing the height of your walls might also help. Depending upon your individual situation there are many creative solutions that can help alleviate any predator issues. Think outside the box! It is also important to protect tortoises from your other pets, especially dogs. It only take one unattended moment for something to go wrong.

Russian Tortoise Maintenance

Spot clean the enclosure everyday focusing on removing uneaten food. Soak your tortoise in warm water once a week to maintain proper health (such healthy defecation).

Brumation

Brumation is a hibernation like state that Russian tortoises go into during cold winter temperatures. Unlike true hibernation they utilize their fat reserves and can even grow during brumation. Let nature take its course! As temperatures naturally cool down, your Russian tortoise will reduce its activity and food intake. As you notice this happening, stop feeding your tortoise altogether to allow its system to clear before brumation (about two weeks). This is important because if they have any food in their system when they brumate, the food will rot and the tortoise may die. When your Russian tortoise is ready, it will go down for the winter. It is very important to not disturb your tortoise during its brumation – not even to soak! As long as your tortoise is able to burrow deeply under substrate you do not need to worry about it freezing if you live in a mild climate. If you experience extreme winters in your location it is best to bring your tortoise indoors. Russian tortoises thrive outdoors year-round in Mediterranean climates. As temperatures increase during the spring your tortoise will come out of brumation naturally and will be very hungry! If there is any indication that your tortoise is unhealthy, do not brumate it. Bring your tortoise in during the winter if unhealthy. *See our Indoor Russian Tortoise Care Sheet. If you are unsure of the health status of your tortoise, take it to a vet appointment before brumation. *At our website www.norcalherp.com we list recommended local vets.

