



Outdoor Box Turtle

A comprehensive guide on caring for your box turtle kept outdoors

Enclosure

Box turtles typically reach 4-6 inches in length and will continue to grow throughout their lives (although their growth rate slows when they reach their mid-teens). These turtles are long-lived and can reach over 50 years of age with proper care. Box turtles can be found from the temperate forest of North Eastern America to the deserts of Southern America and Mexico. They can be found in all types of habitats. Box turtles do best when kept in **outdoor enclosures** with a minimum of 24-inch high walls from the ground up to prevent escape. Box turtles are excellent climbers and escape artists! Do not put hides or other items near walls as those can assist in box turtles escaping. Make sure the walls are smooth, without footholds, to prevent escape. In addition, box turtles 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 box turtle is 4 ft by 4 ft. If you will be housing more than one turtle per enclosure, increase size.

An appropriate outdoor enclosure will incorporate sunny spots and shady spots for the box turtle 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; box turtles are omnivores and may attempt to eat the plants. The Tortoise Table (<https://www.thetortoisetable.org.uk/>) is a good resource for turtle and tortoise safe plants to use in your enclosure. Make sure that any plants used provide shade and are ones that turtles can go underneath for cover. You can also use pre-made hides to provide cover for your turtle as well as innumerable other options if you get creative.

When creating an outdoor box turtle 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 box turtles will use them to keep their long nails trimmed. Logs or other natural wood is great to add as it helps retain humidity in the enclosure and can be a natural source of insects.

Temperatures

Box turtles can handle a wide range of temperatures. Unless you want to avoid winter brumation, you will not need to bring your box turtles indoors. Ensure that your turtles are able to burrow down into their substrate to escape extreme temperatures.

Co-habitation

In general, box turtles are not a social animal. They usually only come together only to reproduce. However, box turtles can generally be housed with each other, including different species and sub-species of box turtles with success. If you do this, be aware that they may mate. Keep co-habitation for outdoors only.



Feeding & Supplements

Box turtles can be very picky eaters; the best solution is to always offer them a wide variety of food. They can be fed a variety of bugs, including crickets, mealworms, superworms, and nightcrawlers. While all ages of box turtles can be fed the same diet, juveniles should be given a higher proportion of protein – up to 90%. As box turtles age, their diet will change to include more produce and the amount of produce offered should be increased accordingly. Adult box turtles should consume approximately 70% produce and 30% protein.

As with protein sources, it's important to also offer a variety of produce options. Good produce to feed a box turtle 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. Apart from insects and vegetables, fruits

should also be provided, and make up about 5% of their diet. Healthy fruit are: apples, grapes, cantaloupe, bananas, persimmons, cherries, papaya, and berries.

These foods listed above are some suggestions of common foods fed out – they are not the only ones! Mix and match to see what your box turtle enjoys. Be aware that there are also plenty of commercial pellet foods available that can be offered with produce and protein to provide a well balanced meal. The Tortoise Table website also provides a helpful list of suitable produce for turtles and tortoises.

Hatchling and juvenile box turtles should be fed every day and adults should be fed at least every other day.

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

Water

Always give your box turtle access to water. A large, shallow saucer pan or water dish with approximately 2 inches of water for adults (less for younger turtles) will allow the turtle 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. Fruits and vegetables also provide hydration for box turtles.



Predation

If you live in an area where your yard is frequented by predators such as raccoons, skunks, and 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 turtles from your other pets, especially dogs. It only take one unattended moment for something to go wrong.

Box Turtle Maintenance

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

Brumation

Brumation is a hibernation like state that box turtles 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 box turtle will reduce its activity. When it is ready, it will go down for the winter. It is very important to not disturb your turtle during its brumation – not even to soak! As long as your turtle is able to burrow deeply under substrate you do not need to worry about it freezing. As temperatures increase during the spring your turtle will come out of brumation naturally and will be very hungry! If there is any indication that your turtle is unhealthy, do not brumate it. Bring your turtle in during the winter if unhealthy. *See our Indoor Box Turtle Care Sheet. If you are unsure of the health status of your turtle, take it to a vet appointment before brumation. *At our website norcalherp.com we list recommended local vets.