**Box Turtles Care Sheet**

**Overview**: Box turtles are members of the American pond turtle family of the genus Terrapene. They are largely characterized by having a domed top [shell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_shell) with a hinged plastern (bottom shell), allowing the animal to retract its head and legs and close its shell tightly in an attempt to protect itself from predators.  However, some overweight specimens are unable to close their shell entirely.

Common predators include [raccoons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raccoon), dogs, cats, coyotes, [rodents](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodent), and large birds, so special care must be taken to protect them.

Box turtles require an outdoor enclosure with consistent exposure to the sun and a varied diet. Without these, a turtle's growth can be stunted and its immune system compromised.

Although box turtles do not intentionally bite, they may mistake fingers for food if feeding by hand and chomp away. Be attentive.

Box turtles are easily stressed by over-handling and when moved into new surroundings.

The average life span of adult box turtles is 40-60 years. Contrary to some believers, the age of a box turtle cannot be accurately estimated by counting the growth rings on their [scutes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scute" \t "_blank). As with all chelonians, growth is directly affected by the amount and types of food, water, exposure to sun, and the size of their habitat.

Box turtle eggs are flexible and oblong. The normal [clutch size](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clutch_size) is 1-7 eggs. In captivity box turtles can have more than one clutch per year.

Box turtles are effective pest control managers in the garden since they love, love, love to feast on insects, snails, and grubs.

Probably due to their diminutive size, the box turtle is secretive and usually remains hidden under the cover of low plants and bushes, burrowed in a pile of leaves, or soaking in marshy waters under vegetation.

The color and pattern on the shell and the skin of this genus is extremely varied, and due to interbreeding of the subspecies can at times be difficult if not impossible to accurately identify.

Box turtles are NOT RECOMMENDED as pets for small children.

**HABITAT:**The best habitat for box turtles is an outdoor enclosure, minimum 10’x10’ bounded by siding, wood, bricks or cement blocks at least 18” high with an over hanging ledge to prevent climbing out. Box turtles are excellent climbers and diggers, therefore the perimeter is very important. Turtles can easily climb chain link and chicken wire fences. They should not be able to see through the walls of the enclosure so solid barriers are the best choice. Turtles also climb on top of each other in order to escape and corners are especially vulnerable. Be sure to top corners with triangular pieces to further prevent escape.

VERY IMPORTANT: Not only must turtles be protected from escaping, but they also must be protected from injury, dismemberment and death often caused by dogs, and increasingly by raccoons and foxes. It’s unrealistic to say that your dog will never chew on your turtle. Most dogs find turtles fascinating and can harm them if given the chance, especially if left unsupervised. If you have raccoons or foxes in your area, you must lock your turtles in their house at night (or bring them into your house). The turtle’s habit of digging into the soil does not protect them from predators. Another option is to completely screen the enclosure above the wall line, like an aviary.

The pen should provide a variety of environments to include sunny and shaded areas with places to hide (fountain grass, grape vines, hibiscus, geraniums, gazanias, spider plants, etc.). The best bedding is a humid substrate (leaves, plant material, topsoil) or bedding such as medium to large orchid bark or cypress mulch mixed with peat moss and soil. You should never allow it to dry out completely. Gravel and rock are not good options as the turtle’s plastern can be damaged by such rough substrates.

Your outdoor enclosure should be supplemented with a secure, solid house with a locking door ramp.

Once the enclosure is built, determine where a shallow water dish can be placed. Box turtles can easily drown in water deeper than 3” and they must be able to get in and out of their water dishes easily. An 18” diameter plastic or terra cotta flower pot saucer sunk into the soil and filled with clean water is a must.

Daily clean water is essential for drinking, soaking and eliminating.

When such an environment is provided, the turtles stay active and healthy for many, many years.

**NOTE: BOX TURTLE SHOULD NOT BE KEPT IN AQUARIUMS!!!** In this limited, inclosed environment, it is virtually impossible to provide the adequate range of temperature necessary to allow the tortoise to self-regulate its internal temperature. Additionally, UVB bulbs are only effective for 3 months max.

**TEMPERATURE:** Turtles are a cold blooded species and depend on the surrounding air as the only way to regulate their body temperature. In captivity box turtles must be provided with a warm area (70o - 90o) and a cooler shaded area allowing the animal to regulate its own temperature as it requires. Always use a thermometer when checking temperatures since human judgment can be very inaccurate. Thermometers should be placed at turtle level in at least two areas of the enclosure.

**SUNLIGHT:**Direct sunlight as an ABSOLUTE REQUIREMENT for the turtle's health and growth. The sun’s UV rays cannot pass through glass. Turtles must also have shade available as well. If their body temperature gets too high, they can quickly die. No artificial lights are acceptable sunlight substitutes on a long-term basis. However, for temporary situations, a reptile type UVB bulb is better than nothing at all. It produces about 90% of the ultra-violet spectrum which is essential to turtles. [IMPORTANT: UVB bulbs must be replaced about every three months or when the ends of the tube begin to turn a dark color. The light will still operate even when the beneficial part of the spectrum is no longer produced. Most exotic pet stores will test the UVB output of your bulbs for you.

**DIET:** Box turtles are omnivores and will basically eat anything they can catch. While reports exist that during their first five to six years, box turtles are primarily [carnivorous](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnivores) and adults are mostly [herbivorous](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbivore), there is no scientific basis to support that assertion.

The main diet of the box turtle should consist of untreated snails, slugs, bugs, hard boiled eggs (shells and all), insects, fruits and vegetables, earthworms, night crawlers, sow bugs, meal worms, insect larvae and pupae, beetles, crickets, caterpillars, grasshoppers, ground beef heart and beef liver. A good quality veterinary grade dry turtle food and/or a low fat protein like canned dog or cat food is sufficient.  Some of their favorite fruits and vegetables include bananas, mangoes, papayas, cantaloupes, apples, cherries, grapes, all kinds of squash, yams, sweet potatoes, peas, and mushrooms. Rumor has it that pumpkin is a natural, organic dewormer.

These foods will provide a balanced diet that your turtle needs to grow, stay healthy, and maintain a good weight.

An adult box turtle should be given meals at least three times per week. Juvenile and baby box turtles should be fed daily and given vitamin and calcium supplements at least three times a week.

Variety is the most important word in feeding. Inadequate diet is the number two cause of turtle and tortoise death in captivity, because it lowers their resistance to illness and disease. The number one cause is keeping the animal at too low a temperature.

**VITAMINS:** Vitamins and minerals are very important! Box turtles should be given veterinary grade vitamins and minerals on their food once each week. Place the supplements in a salt shaker and sprinkle on the food lightly. A cuttle bone and mineral block should be always be available somewhere within their enclosure for them to chew on as necessary. Cuttle bones help keep the turtles beak trimmed as well as provide needed calcium. Many box turtles are secretive animals and may not eat in the presence of humans or other turtles and tortoises. They require an area where they can hide and feel safe when eating (under low bushes, logs, etc.). Moisture and humidity stimulate activity and eating.

DANGER: Do not use snail bait, poisons or fertilizers in the turtle enclosure or on plants and insects the turtle will be fed. These can poison the turtles directly, or indirectly, by the turtle eating bugs that have poison within their bodies.

**ANT PROBLEMS**: Ants not only accumulate on and eat vegetable matter and meats, they also can kill turtles! You must be vigilant by removing any uneaten food source after 30 minutes and eliminate ants when they are seen around your turtles and their food dishes. Pouring boiling water on the ant nests is one way. Another method is to remove the turtles and their food and water from the area and spray the ants with Formula 409 All Purpose Cleaner (Clorox company). This not only kills the ants but also removes the ant trail so others cannot follow an established trail to the food or the turtles. Wait 30 minutes, wash the area down with water, and replace the turtles and their food. Some people use white vinegar on the ant hills. Another method to keep ants out of the turtle food is to place the plate containing the turtle's food into a larger plate that has been filled with water. This way the ants cannot cross the water to get to the food. Never use toxic substances inside the turtle enclosure.

**WATER**: These turtles use water for drinking, lowering body temperature, and to clean out their nostrils, eyes and anal openings. Bathing in water also helps the animal eliminate properly. This cleaning plays an important part in keeping the animal healthy and washing off potential parasites which could be harmful. Therefore, water dishes must be kept clean!!

**WINTER HIBERNATION:** Box turtles are genetically engineered to hibernate during the cooler months. North American box turtles are native to a climate with very hot summer temperatures and very cold winter temperatures. In our warmer Southern California winters, to ensure that your (healthy) turtle remains in hibernation throughout the winter months (November-March), they should be kept in a constant temperature between 40-60 degrees. This can be achieved by placing them in a rodent proof bin (with small air holes) in the coolest room/closet of your house or in the garage. Another option is to place the bin inside his house in an area of your yard that receives the least amount of sun during this time of year. Make sure the bin is protected from rain and from temperatures below 40 degrees. Some turtle owners place reusable ice packs in the turtle house to keep temps low.

**BREEDING:**Box turtles mate predominantly after cooler weather or, to a lesser degree, in the fall before cooler weather; but in some cases mating activity has been observed throughout the year. Your enclosure must be large enough to provide hiding places where the female has the opportunity to hide and eat unmolested. Sometimes constant mating causes the female to stop eating and can also cause a prolapse (intestine protruding from the cloaca) and eventual death if left untreated and not separated from the male.

**AILMENTS:** The most common illness in box turtles, as in most chelonians, is evidenced by runny or clogged nostrils, swollen, runny or filmy eyes, wheezing, large lumps or swollen area near the ear (side of the neck), white or black tongue and/or mouth (normally these are light pink), and not eating regularly. Care Consultants in the Society can help you identify most health issues. You can also find a list of our recommended veterinarian specialists posted on our website, [sdturtle.org](http://sdturtle.org/) under “Resources”. Although a somewhat hardy species, anyone keeping turtles (or any pet for that matter) should be prepared to spend money on veterinary care if the situation arises.

**CONSERVATION CONCERNS:** Box turtles are heavily collected in the wild for the world wide pet trade which is a serious detriment to the individual animals and the wild populations. Subjected to horrendous collection methods, the majority of box turtles die before they can be sold and many of those finally offered for sale are severely stressed and ill due to grossly negligent and abusive treatment following capture.