



Western New York Herpetological Society

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Common Name: Sulcata Tortoise **Latin name** *Geochelone sulcata*
African Spur thigh Tortoise

Native to: Southern Sahara desert region ranging from Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia

Size: The largest shell length ranges up to 36 inches and weighs up to 240 lbs.

Life span: If taken care of properly a Sulcata tortoise can live up to 70 years.

General appearance: The sulcata tortoise is a uniform color of brown to golden yellow color. Growth rings on each scute appear on the carapace. There are also well-defined spurs on the rear legs, which gives it its name African spur thigh tortoise. The skin is thick which may serve to reduce fluid loss through transpiration.

Housing requirements:

Enclosure: Because of the size of the tortoise, you will need to build a pen. If you live in a climate that is warm enough, the pen can be built outside and they can live outside all year round. A shelter with a ramp should be provided for these outdoor pens. If you live in a climate that the winter does get cold, an average sized adult will need a six-foot by six-foot indoor grazing area and a six-foot by six-foot basking area. If the tortoise does not get enough room to exercise the tortoise may lose muscle mass. When housed outdoors, fencing should extend at least two feet underground because these tortoises like to burrow.

Temperature: An ambient temperature should be kept at 72° –85° F. A basking area should be kept on one side of the enclosure at a temperature of 85° - 89° F. At night, the temperature can drop down to 70° - 75° F. It is a good practice to let the tortoise soak at least twice a week.

Heat/Light: It is important that adequate lighting is provided. Lighting must provide UVA and UVB for proper skeletal and shell development. Incandescent lights may be used to provide basking spots. Ceramic emitters or under-the-tank heaters may also be used to heat the enclosure. Heated rocks are NOT recommended.



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Substrate: Sulcata tortoises like to dig and burrow. It is important to give the tortoise something that they can burrow in. A mix of 50% sterile play sand and a 50% organic soil works well. Hay with newspaper can also be used. Other suitable substrates are alfalfa pellets, aspen particles, or Lizard Litter®. Some people also consider using Carefresh®. Pine, cedar, and oyster shells should be avoided.

Environment: These tortoises come from a desert region therefore require a dry, arid enclosure. A hide box is often beneficial. Many people use a Dogloo® and put a pig blanket in the housing for warmth in large enclosures.

Diet: Sulcatas tortoises are grazers and need high fiber and low protein diet. Mixed grasses, orchard hay, timothy hay, optunia pads and berries, hibiscus leaves and flowers, clove, prickly pear pads, dandelion greens and flower, Dutch clover, rose leaves and petals, sow thistle, romaine, and red leaf lettuce. You can also give mulberry leaves and grape leaves in limited quantities. Animal protein should be avoided. Fruits should be fed sparingly if at all.

Maintenance: The enclosure should be spot cleaned daily. A thorough cleaning should be performed on a regular basis. A 5% bleach solution is an excellent disinfectant. Be sure to thoroughly rinse the enclosure before replacing the substrate and placing the tortoise back in the enclosure. It is always recommended to wash your hands thoroughly after handling the tortoise or cleaning the cage or cage accessories.

Other references or recommended reading:

Palika, Liz.. Turtles and Tortoises for Dummies. Howell House 2001

Highfield, Andy. Practical Encyclopedia of Keeping and Breeding Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles.. Carapace Press 1996

Highfield, Andy . Practical Care of Leopard and Sulcata Tortoises. Carapace Press

Armour (Adam) Marissa. "African Spurred Tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) retrieved 21 October 2001. Available online:

<http://home.earthlink.net/~rednine/sulcatacare.html>

Chirico, Theresa. "Sulcata and Leopard Tortoise Links and Information" retrieved 21 October 2001.

Available online: http://www.turtlecafe.net/sulcata_leopard_care.html

Kaplan, Melissa "Sulcata Tortoise" retrieved 21 October 2001

Available online: <http://www.anapsid.org/sulcata.html>