

Russian Tortoises (*Testudo horsfieldii*)

Introduction to Russian Tortoises

Russian Tortoises (also called Central Asian Tortoises) have been imported in large numbers in recent years. They are hardy, stay small (4 to 8"), and tolerate a wide range of conditions, including cold winters. They are drab with tan to tannish yellow carapaces with gray skin but make up for this with their charming personality.

Russian Tortoises range from China to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in dry, arid habitats. They live in areas with hot, dry summers and cold winters. In most of their range they live in burrows that they dig or in abandoned animal burrows.

Indoor Enclosures for Russian Tortoises

The most common form of indoor accommodation for small or medium-sized tortoises is a large terrarium such as a plastic tub, a wooden cage or "Tortoise Table", and other enclosures. Glass terrariums are also used because they are easy to find at the local pet store and they come in a variety of sizes. A pair of adult Russian Tortoises will require an enclosure that is at least 24" wide x 48" long. A young tortoise can live in a 12" wide x 12" high x 30" long enclosure until it reaches 3-4" in length, especially if it is getting plenty of exercise outside the enclosure. Adult males are very aggressive towards each other and so a keeper must either keep one male with one female (or multiple females), or must provide a large enclosure with plenty of wood, rock piles, and other areas in which males can separate themselves from each other.

The substrate for adult Russians can be a 6-8" deep mixture of ½ sand and ½ peat moss. A layer of cypress mulch and dead leaves can be placed over the top of the substrate. The substrate should be kept dry. Tortoises, and especially young tortoises can be kept on "reptile carpet" or corrugated paper for cleanliness and to help prevent them eating substrate.

A variety of shelters can be offered to give the tortoise a feeling of security. We suggest adding a large piece of curved cork bark, clumps of grass, piles of straw, and/or piles of leaves. These should be located at the cooler end of the enclosure and not directly under the heat-emitting lamps.

Heat should be provided using a heat-emitting bulb overhead. Ideally, a keeper will add a sturdy screen top to the enclosure and this heat lamp can rest on the screen at one end of the enclosure. The heat-emitting lamp should provide a basking spot of 95-100° F at one end of the enclosure. This will provide a hot end for the tortoise to bask each day. If this heat lamp does not also emit UVB rays, then the keeper will need to add a UVB-emitting 'reptile light' overhead as well. This UVB is necessary for Vitamin D3 synthesis (needed in calcium metabolism) and to keep the tortoise healthy.

Water should be offered in a flat container such as a plastic plant saucer. These can be easily cleaned and sterilized once a week or as needed.

Outdoor Enclosures for Russian Tortoises

Of course, all tortoises benefit from being kept outdoors for all or part of their lives. They receive doses of UVB radiation from the sun, environmental heat, and of course enjoy a connection to the grass, plants, and soil found in outdoor pens. Outdoor enclosures should offer shelter from heat, a secure place to rest, a water source, and protection from predators. Outside, their regular feedings can be supplemented with plantings of grasses, dandelion, clover, fruits, and vegetables within the enclosure. A keeper must be very diligent to make sure that outdoor enclosures are escape-proof and predator-proof. Russian Tortoises are strong burrowers and can quickly dig under and out of an enclosure. Care must be taken to prevent this from happening. Russian Tortoises require warm, dry environments. During extremely hot days and cool days, they will retreat under a bush, into a small heated doghouse, or another shelter.

Buying a Russian Tortoise

Typically, the farm-raised specimens available at pet stores and reptile expos are healthy and will make excellent pets, however they should be checked for health-related issues, parasites, and they may not acclimate well to all outdoor environments. Always check these three things when considering purchasing a tortoise:

1. Make sure the tortoise feels heavy and that it pushes off of your fingers with strength.
2. Make sure the tortoise's eyes are clear, alert, and not swollen.
3. Make sure the tortoise's ventral area is clean and does not show evidence of loose stools.

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Feeding Russian Tortoises

Russian Tortoises will feed eagerly on grasses and mixed salads featuring a variety of shredded vegetables each day. We suggest Romaine lettuce, Spring Mix, spineless Opuntia cactus, carrots, and squash. They should be fed fruit sparingly. Commercial diets for "grass-eating species" are also great supplements to the Russian's diet.

