

African Spurred Tortoise (*Geochelone sulcata*)

Origins: These tortoises originate from the deserts of Africa, and are the largest African mainland tortoise. The only tortoises larger are the giant species from the Galapagos and Seychelles. Sulcata tortoises occur across Sub-Saharan Africa in Mauritania, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Chad, Senegal and Mali. They are non-hibernating tortoises, and so require large winter housing areas.

Adult Size and Life Span: As with all tortoises, if these animals are correctly cared for, they should have a lifespan of up to 150 years. Males and females reach a length of up to 90cm (36"). Juveniles are normally sold at about 10cm (4") long, ageing between 2 and 3 years old.

Diet and Feeding: Sulcata tortoises are a vegetarian grazing species and should be fed a strictly herbivorous, high fibre diet. Suitable foods are dandelions, plantains, clover, chickweed, mixed grasses, hay, succulents and sow thistles. In the winter, when natural weeds are in short supply, provide cabbages and coarse green leaf material – try to avoid lettuce and very watery foods, as these provide no goodness for the tortoises. All foodstuffs offered should be dusted with a calcium supplement such as Nutrobal, to ensure the correct levels are maintained in the diet for strong and healthy bones and shell. Calcium in the form of chalk or cuttlefish can also be offered as a more natural source. Never feed these tortoises animal protein, high carbohydrate or high sugar foods. Always provide fresh, clean water in a shallow bowl. Bathing these tortoises regularly in lukewarm water will be beneficial to them.

Housing Set Up: These tortoises require a heated vivarium (when small) or greenhouse/heated shed (when larger) for

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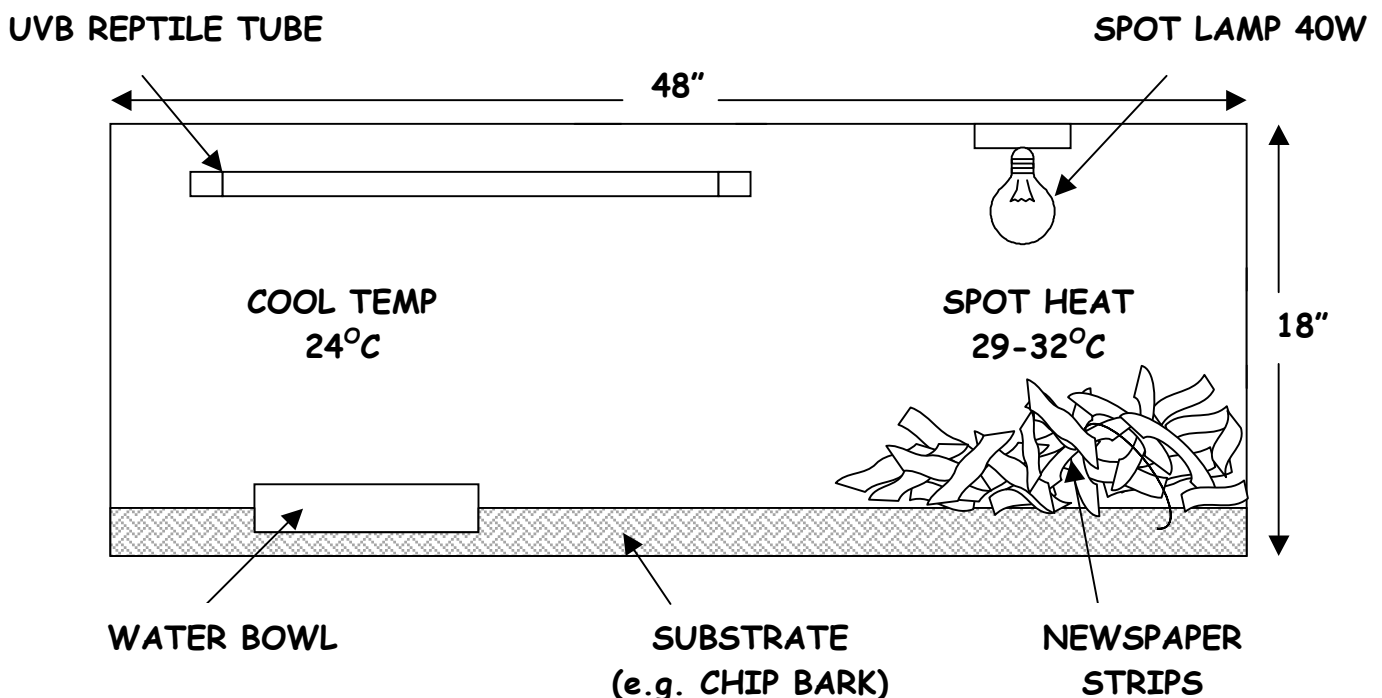
overcast, cooler days and winter months. It is also essential to provide an outdoor pen, with access to natural grazing. See the diagrams below for these set-ups.

Indoor Vivariums: A good size vivarium for a juvenile tortoise is a 36" x 18" x 18" or 48" x 18" x 18" as these provide a large bottom surface area. Within these set ups, there must be:-

Heating: Daytime temperatures must reach 85 - 90°F (29 - 33 °C) in the hot spots, with cool spots of 68 - 75°F (20 - 23.9°C). This is achieved via spot bulbs or infra-red ceramic bulbs at the hot-end of the vivarium. Temperatures can drop to normal room temperature at night. The water bowl must be placed in the cooler end of the vivarium.

Lighting: A UV-B bulb is essential to ensure that vitamin D₃ is correctly synthesised and the animal will maintain a strong skeleton. Use a Reptiglo 8.0 bulb, across the back of the vivarium, for 10 -12 hours per day as a simulation of natural daylength.

Substrate and Decoration: Sulcata tortoises require a dry, sandy or loamy habitat, which can be achieved via beech chip, sand or compost. Use rocks and cork bark to create hiding areas and interest for climbing, or shredded paper can be used. The substrate should be changed and removed when dirty.

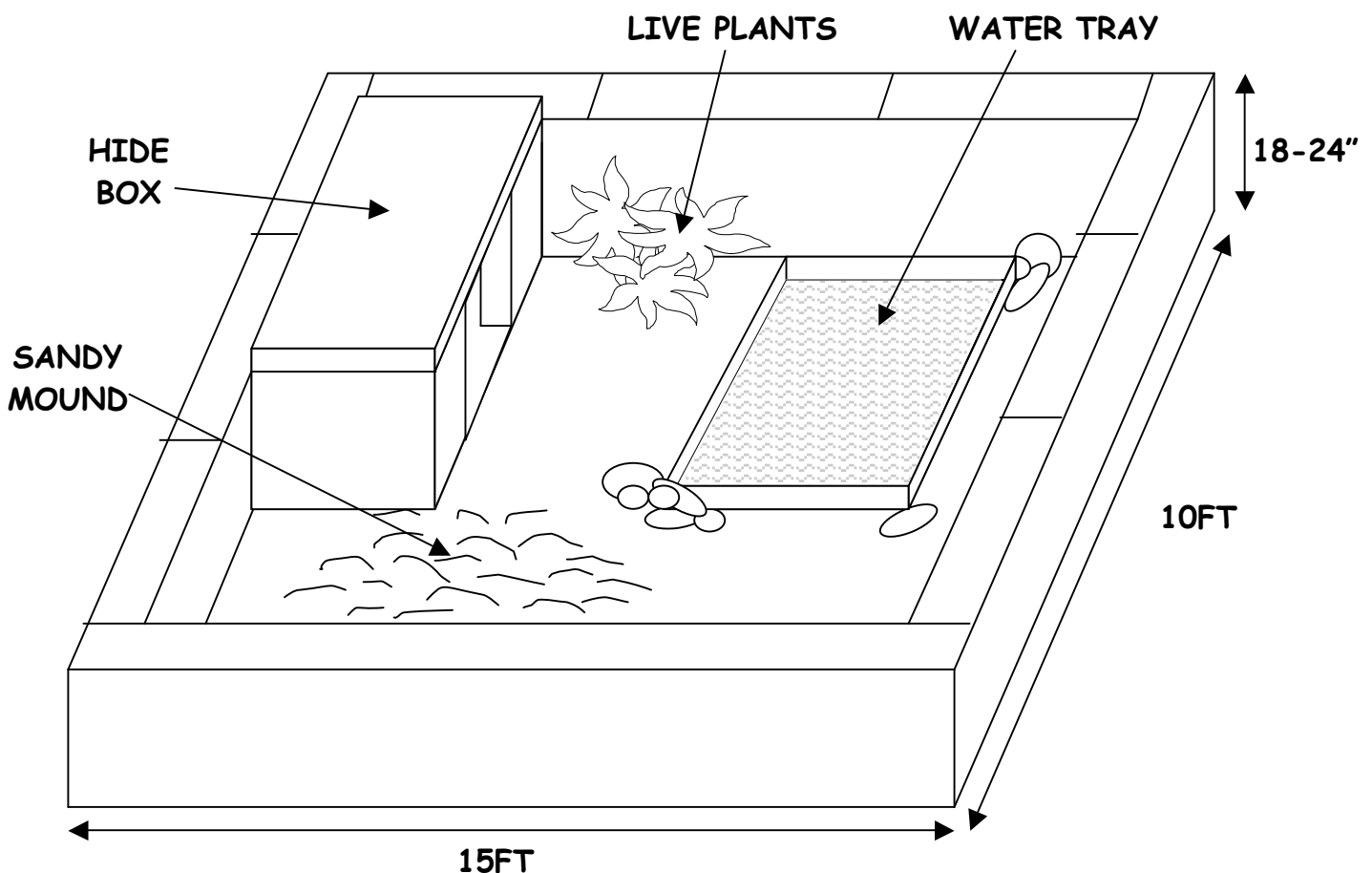


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Outdoor pen enclosure:

The outdoor pen can be constructed from a variety of materials – wood, stone or breeze blocks. The measurements given here are a rough guide, and you should give your tortoise as much room as you can possibly provide. As with the indoor vivariums a shallow water bowl/tray and hide box should be provided. The hide box will also provide a shelter for the tortoise from wind or rain. When the tortoises are larger, the hide box should be replaced by the heated shed or greenhouse.

Live plants and sand/soil mounds can also be included to create areas of interest, but care should be taken to protect the outdoor enclosure from predators such as foxes, rats and large birds. Ensure the walls of the pen are dug approximately six inches into the ground to prevent the tortoise digging its way to freedom – most tortoises are excellent climbers and diggers!



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Hibernation: These tortoises do not hibernate.

Further Information and Advice: It is recommended that you read and gain as much information as possible before purchasing your tortoise. Books and reliable websites are good sources, or alternatively ask a member of staff.

Some of the best are: -

- Practical Encyclopaedia of Keeping and Breeding Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles, by Andy Highfield
- The Tortoise Trust Website www.tortoisetrust.org.uk

There are also two Tortoise Clubs open to owners and enthusiasts of all tortoise species. One runs in Norfolk and one in Suffolk – please ask a member of staff for more details.

It is important that if you do have a problem with your tortoise, you consult a good, knowledgeable vet. Swallow Aquatics knows many of the practices in the surrounding area, so if you require advice, please ask a member of staff.

Phone advice is also available from Swallow Aquatics 9am-6pm, 7 days a week on 01953 718184.