

Sulcata or African Spurred Tortoises (*Centrochelys sulcata*)

Introduction to Sulcata or African Spurred Tortoises

African Spurred Tortoises though not the most beautiful tortoise in the world, are large, impressive animals. They are the third largest species on the planet after the giant tortoises from the Galapagos and Aldabras.

SULCATAS grow quite large, with many adults reaching 20" for females and 30" for males. Females typically reach weights of 65 to 75 pounds and large males can grow to 125 to 150 pounds.

SULCATAS are outgoing and very strong. They can dig deep burrows, push over ornaments in the yard, etc. A keeper should be careful to "baby proof" the tortoise's habitat so it cannot flip over on its back while the keeper is away. This can prove fatal.

SULCATAS are among the most hardy and outgoing of the pet tortoises. They do, however, get much larger than most owners can deal with. They grow relatively quickly, are very powerful, and require a lot of food (and a varied diet). A keeper must consider these needs before purchasing a SULCATA.

PLEASE do not ever release a SULCATA or any reptile pet into the wild. There are adoption organizations that will take your unwanted pet, no questions asked, and find the proper captive environment for it. (www.ttpg.org for details)

Enclosure

The most common form of indoor accommodation for small or medium sized African Spurred Tortoises is a large terrarium. Keepers can use plastic tubs, wooden cages, and other enclosures, but glass terrariums are easy to find at the local pet store and they come in a variety of sizes. Of course, as the tortoise grows, it will need larger and larger enclosures. A pair of adult SULCATAS will require a large backyard and outbuilding that is at least 12' wide x 24' long.

The substrate for SULCATAS can be a mixture of $\frac{3}{4}$ sand and $\frac{1}{4}$ peat moss. A layer of grass hay can be added at one end to provide some shelter. The substrate should be kept dry as SULCATAS are sensitive to damp conditions.

African Spurred Tortoises are outgoing and very tame. However, a keeper should provide a variety of shelters to give these tortoises a feeling of security. We add large pieces of curved cork bark, large banana leaves, piles of straw or hay, etc. for the tortoises to use as shelter. The shelter 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 in a lamp from overhead. Ideally, this heat lamp should hang just about 12" above the substrate. The heat-emitting bulb should provide a basking spot of 90° to 95° F (32° to 35° C) at one end of the enclosure. This will provide a hot end for the tortoise to enjoy. Most keepers will also place a shop light fixture overhead that is fitted with one or two UV-emitting bulbs. These can be found at your pet store or on-line from a variety of sources. UVB-emitting bulbs will also provide UV radiation to the enclosure. This UVB is necessary for Vitamin D3 production (needed for calcium absorption, proper muscle functioning, etc.).

Handling Sulcata or African Spurred Tortoises

Though SULCATAS are quite tame, most tortoises probably do not enjoy being handled. They usually won't retreat into their shells and will usually look around to see what is going on. They can be hand-fed and red strawberries, pieces of melon, and hibiscus flowers are some of their favorite treats. Specimens that have been raised from small, captive-hatched babies and which are open to daily interaction over many years become the most tame and easily handled captives.

Feeding Sulcata or African Spurred Tortoises

SULCATAS should be fed a diet that is very high in fiber. They will feed eagerly on a mixed salad of greens and vegetables each day, but a keeper should try to offer as much grass, hay, dandelions, leaves, and Opuntia cactus pads as possible. A sprinkle of calcium should be offered on the salad every few times. For optimal health, they should be fed fruits only sparingly or not at all. We offer our Leopards some melon, apple, and other fruits during the hot summers, but only once every ten days to two weeks. These Tortoises should not be fed any dog food or cat food and commercial foods only very seldom as they are prone to renal problems and medical issues related to high protein diets.

Watering Sulcata or African Spurred Tortoises

Water should be offered in a flat saucer. This can be a flat dish or a plastic saucer which is normally placed under a plant pot. These can be easily cleaned and sterilized once a week or as needed. Many keepers will simply remove their SULCATA from the enclosure and soak it in shallow water once a week. This will give the small tortoise some water to drink and will let it rehydrate.



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