



Captive Sonoran  
**Desert Tortoise**  
Adoption Guide





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## 1 Welcome home

Congratulations on adopting your captive desert tortoise, and thank you for sharing your home with a species unique to the Sonoran Desert! Adopters like you help the Arizona Game and Fish Department conserve and protect the state's wild desert tortoises.

Captive desert tortoises cannot be released back into the wild as they may not be able to properly seek food and can carry illnesses that could harm wild populations. As such, the department appreciates those willing to help in our mission to conserve and protect the state's wildlife.

We know how exciting it can be to add a new member to your family, but keep in mind that new surroundings may stress your tortoise. Be sure to allow the tortoise time to acclimate to its enclosure and settle into its new routine. This guide outlines several tips and suggestions that will ensure your new family member remains healthy for decades to come.

## 2 Appropriate Diet

To ensure your tortoise lives a long and healthy life, it will need regular access to a diet of native plants and grasses. Desert tortoises are herbivores, meaning their diet is comprised of plants. Below are several guidelines to ensure you provide a variety of appropriate foods to meet your tortoise's nutritional needs.

### 2.1 Native plants and grasses are best

Allow the tortoise to browse on plants you can establish in your backyard or enclosure.

Grasses in your backyard that have not been treated with fertilizers, pesticides and/or insecticides can make up a significant portion of the tortoise's diet. Provide a patch of grass or native plants for your tortoise. You can supplement its diet with bermuda grass or timothy hay.

- **PRO TIP:** Tortoises will eat hay, but many enjoy it better after it has been soaked in water for no more than 5 minutes. Replace old, yellow hay with new fresh hay for your tortoise daily.

See the next page for a list of favored native plants that will provide adequate nutrition for the tortoise.



## 2.2 Commercially prepared foods

Commercially prepared foods are generally less nutritious than native plants and grasses. However, commercial plants such as romaine, red leaf and green leaf lettuces; dandelion, mustard, turnip and collard greens; bell peppers, parsley and cilantro can all be used to supplement your tortoise’s diet.

## 2.3 Foods to avoid: Pet foods and frozen, canned veggies

Dog or cat food, monkey chow or similar pet foods often contain vitamins and minerals that are harmful to your tortoise. It is very important not to feed pet foods to your tortoise as they can cause organ damage and deformed shell growth. If you have other pets, make sure their food dishes cannot be accessed by the tortoise. Frozen vegetables and sodium-rich foods like canned vegetables, dairy products, breads and celery should also be avoided.

Favored Native Plants	
Common Name	Parts Consumed
Arizona cottontop grass	All
Bamboo muhly grass	All
Blue grama grass	All
Buckwheats	All
Cassis	All
Curly mesquite grass	All
Deer grass	All
Desert four-o'clock	All
Desert honeysuckle	All
Desert senna	All
Desert willow	All
Evening primrose	All
Fern acacia	Flowers only
Globe mallows	All
Hibiscus	Flowers and leaves
Indian mallow	All
Morning glory	All
Plantain	All
Prickly pear	Fruit and new pads
Spurges	All
Trailing four-o'clock	All
Vine mesquite grass	All

## 2.4 Limit fruits

All fruits are high in sugar and should not exceed more than 10 percent of your tortoise’s overall diet. Fruits can be given as a treat, but should not be part of its daily diet. Tortoises also enjoy prickly pear cactus fruit, which can be provided when in season. Pumpkin and various squashes can also be given on occasion.



### 3 Water

Your tortoise will get much of its water from its food, so you may not see it drink very frequently.

- **PRO TIP:** Tortoises enjoy soaking in their water dish. This helps to hydrate and cool it down during the hot summer months. Because of this, the water dish should be an inch or two deep and large enough for the tortoise to sit in.

#### 3.1 Water: Too much of a good thing

In the wild, tortoises only get large drinks of water when it rains. This helps to flush their system of urates (concentrated urine) and other minerals. When they constantly have access to water, the tortoise is unable to flush its system, which can create a build up in the bladder and lead to bladder stones.

To prevent your tortoise from developing bladder stones, only provide water to your tortoise twice a week.

### 4 Hot weather living

While desert tortoises are built for arid climates and heat, when temperatures top 110 degrees, your tortoise may need extra care. Depending on the orientation and/or location of your burrow, too much sun exposure can elevate burrow temperatures beyond 95 degrees.



#### 4.1 Track your burrow temperature

Consider installing a remote indoor/outdoor thermometer sensor inside the burrow to track the burrow's internal temperature. This will allow you to have an idea of how hot it is inside compared to the outdoor temperature.

- **PRO TIP:** If the temp in the burrow rises above 95 degrees consider placing a light water sprinkler in the back side of the burrow, but be careful that it doesn't flood. Place the sprinkler on a timer for 45 minutes. This will ensure that the burrow doesn't get too humid, which can cause respiratory issues.



On days where highs reach 110 degrees or above, provide your tortoise with a full water dish, taking care to place it in a shady spot so the water does not get too hot.

#### **4.2 Shade? Yes, please!**

If the burrow is getting too much direct sunlight, construct a temporary shade structure, which will help to lower the temperature of the burrow.

- **PRO TIP:** Install live native plants such as grass or other edibles on the top of the burrow, as they will naturally lower the temp of the burrow and provide another food option for your tortoise.

## **5 Brumating: The seasonal slumber**

Cold-blooded animals, like desert tortoises, “brumate” during winter months, while warm blooded animals “hibernate.”

During brumation, your tortoise’s respiration rate, activity, heart rate and metabolic rate will drop to conserve energy and keep it warm. The tortoise might become active on warmer days and come out to bask in the sunshine, but this is normal and there’s no need to intervene, as long as it returns to its burrow by sundown. Healthy captive desert tortoises, including hatchlings, should be allowed to brumate in an outdoor shelter whenever possible.

### **5.1 Brumating 101**

Desert tortoises generally brumate from October through March, but may begin as early as September and end as late as July depending on outside temperatures.

As consistently cooler temperatures start to move into your area, the tortoise will become less active. During this time, it is important that the tortoise eats every day until daytime temperatures drop below 85 degrees.

Desert tortoises normally brumate when the nighttime temperatures drop below 50 degrees for a few nights in a row. During this time, your tortoise will retreat to its shelter and may not emerge until spring or the onset of summer rains.

If your tortoise does not move into its shelter by the time nightly temperatures are consistently below 50 degrees — or you’re not sure if the shelter will remain dry during winter storms — you will need to brumate the tortoise indoors in a cool, dark area such as a storage garage, shed or other outdoor building.



## 5.2 Health exam before brumation

The tortoise should be seen by a qualified veterinarian annually to make sure it's healthy enough to brumate. The Arizona Game and Fish Department and cooperating veterinarians offer a pre-brumation clinic at a low price to tortoise caretakers. Email [TAP@azgfd.gov](mailto:TAP@azgfd.gov) to be contacted about the details of the clinic.

- **IMPORTANT NOTE:** Do not allow the tortoise to brumate if you suspect it may be ill. Doing so could intensify health issues or lead to death. Seek a qualified veterinarian for examination and treatment. See page 7 for a list of reptile veterinarians.



## 5.3 Staying hydrated before and during brumation

Dehydration can put desert tortoises at risk before and during brumation — especially in particularly dry winters.

Before your tortoise enters brumation, soak it in 1 to 3 inches of room temperature tap water (depending on the tortoise's size) for approximately 20 minutes. Be sure the water does not go over the tortoise's head.

You also can soak your tortoise if it becomes active during brumation season, but not more frequently than once a month. Be sure to dry your tortoise completely before it moves into its shelter and begins brumation.

## 5.4 Brumating indoors in colder climates

If you live outside the tortoise's natural desert range and nightly temperatures will routinely fall below 50 degrees, you will need to brumate the tortoise in a cool, dark area inside your home. Choose an area such as a closet or basement that will not go below 50 degrees.

- **PRO TIP:** Use a non-transparent, well-ventilated plastic storage container or tote packed with shredded paper, straw or hay to provide adequate insulation. Place the lid on and cover with blankets for added insulation. Make sure to keep the tote away from any drafts or potential rodent invasion(s).



## 6 Illness

By providing a forever home for a tortoise, you are responsible for its overall health. Therefore it's important to closely monitor the tortoise for the earliest sign of an arising health issue. Be mindful of disruptions from its normal routine.

Common symptoms of an ill tortoise include inactivity, runny nose, labored breathing, bulging eyes, dehydration, swollen eyelids and loss of appetite. These can be signs of several medical issues, including upper respiratory disease, dehydration, bladder stones, wounds, malnutrition or parasites.

### 6.1 Upper Respiratory Disease

Upper respiratory disease (URD) is very common among captive desert tortoises and often described as a "tortoise cold." It's one of the main reasons desert tortoises cannot be returned to the wild once in captivity. Signs of URD include a runny nose, bubbles from the nostrils, discharge from the eyes, lethargy and/or trouble breathing.

Some desert tortoises that come into the adoption program have had this illness at some point in their life. If a tortoise has previously contracted an upper respiratory disease, it could flare up again. If you suspect your tortoise is ill, make an appointment with a veterinarian who has experience with desert tortoises.

Other common health problems and symptoms include:

- **Dehydration** — sunken eyes and lethargy
- **Parasites** — lethargy accompanied by weight loss, abdominal stress and loose stool
- **Malnutrition** — lethargy, listlessness and loose stools

If you suspect any of these conditions, consult a veterinarian that's experienced with desert tortoises. (See listing of reptile veterinarians on the next page.)



<b>Reptile Veterinarians</b>		
<b>Phoenix</b>		
Arizona Exotic Animal Hospital	20040 N. 19th Ave. Ste C, Phoenix	623-243-5200
<b>Cave Creek</b>		
Dove Valley Animal Hospital	4815 E. Carefree Hwy #116, Cave Creek	480-595-5731
<b>West Valley — Peoria, Glendale, Surprise</b>		
Roadrunner Animal Hospital	7435 W. Cactus Rd., Peoria	623-878-0033
<b>East Valley — Mesa, Gilbert</b>		
Arizona Exotic Animal Hospital	744 N. Center St. #101, Mesa	480-275-7017
Avian and Exotic Animal Clinic of AZ	1911 S. Lindsay Rd., Gilbert	480-706-8478

## 7 What to do if your tortoise escapes

Tortoises are burrowers, so it’s possible it may escape if your enclosure and yard aren’t properly secured. The tortoise has a small, colored, numbered tag on its shell, which is linked to your name and address. The same number is also printed on your adoption certificate, so store this document in a secure location in case the tag falls off the tortoise’s shell.

If your tortoise gets out of your yard, notify the Tortoise Adoption Program immediately and provide the tortoise’s tag number. If your tortoise is found and/or reported, we use the tag number to verify to whom it belongs.

You will be asked to provide your name and phone number for the Tortoise Adoption Program to contact you to arrange pick up from the adoption facility. Before picking up your tortoise, you may be asked to provide proof that repairs were made to the enclosure to prevent another escape.

Unfortunately, unless the tortoise is found and turned in to our facility, we are unable to provide assistance in locating it.



## 7.1 Microchipping

The department does not microchip tortoises, but it is advised that you get your tortoise microchipped. Any of the veterinarians listed on page 7 provide this service for a fee.

If you choose to microchip your tortoise, please notify the department's Tortoise Adoption Program so it can be noted in our database.

### Tips: Locating a lost tortoise

- Report the missing tortoise to the Tortoise Adoption Program.
- Hang signs in your neighborhood and post on social media pages, such as Facebook and Nextdoor.
- Ask around your neighborhood.
- Look under bushes, in small spaces and under patio furniture.
- Run sprinklers in your yard. Tortoises come out of their hiding places for rain.

## 8 Rehoming a tortoise

Caring for a captive desert tortoise is a long-term responsibility, but if a situation arises that you cannot keep your tortoise, it is possible to rehome it to a trusted friend or family member. However, we ask that you contact us so we can update our database. This will ensure our records are current for the tortoise.

- **IMPORTANT NOTE:** It is illegal for desert tortoises to be bred, bought, sold or exported out of Arizona. Violators can and will be prosecuted.

If you are unable to rehome the tortoise, contact one of the two state-sanctioned desert tortoise adoption facilities listed below.

- **Tucson:** Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum at 520-883-3062
- **Statewide:** Toll-free 844-896-5730 or email [TAP@azgfd.gov](mailto:TAP@azgfd.gov)



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Q: What if I love my new tortoise so much, I want to make more?**

A: It's illegal to breed captive desert tortoises. Like dogs and cats, there are more tortoises than there are suitable homes. To help control the captive tortoise population, it is recommended to spay female tortoises.

### **Q: What happens if my newly adopted tortoise lays eggs and they hatch?**

A: Like chickens, female tortoises can lay eggs even without a male present. Additionally, female tortoises can hold sperm inside their body for a period of time. Because it is impossible to know if a female tortoise has been exposed to a male tortoise prior to coming to our facility, there is a possibility that the female tortoise could lay fertile eggs after being adopted. Tortoise caregivers are required by law to turn over any captive hatchlings to a state-sanctioned adoption facility within 24 months of hatching.

### **Q: Can I adopt more than one tortoise?**

A: Yes, but tortoises are territorial and can become aggressive with another tortoise. Furthermore, tortoises of differing sexes can breed if they are not spayed or neutered. As such, it is recommended that each tortoise has a separate enclosure so they can't see each other as this may stress both animals.

Only tortoises of the same sex will be adopted to the same household to prevent breeding. A tortoise of the opposite sex can be adopted if one has been spayed or neutered.

### **Q: Does my tortoise need a friend?**

A: Desert tortoises are solitary animals — they like to be spoiled all their own and do not require any additional tortoises for company. They are very territorial, and it can be dangerous to house adult tortoises together.

### **Q: Can my dog and tortoise live together?**

A: Dogs and tortoises can coexist, but you must provide adequate time and space for your dog (and children) to acclimate to the tortoise during supervised visits. There have been many cases where well-behaved dogs mauled a tortoise or



children hit or dropped the tortoise, resulting in severe injuries, expensive veterinarian bills and even death.

In most cases, dogs and tortoises coexist with few problems. If your dog expresses focused interest in the tortoise, construct a barrier that's high enough to exclude the dog.

**Q: Can I house my tortoise with other reptiles/animals?**

A: Desert tortoises must be housed separately from other species of turtles or tortoises, as potentially fatal diseases and parasites can spread between species.

**Q: Do I have to worry about using chemicals or pesticides around my tortoise?**

A: Do not use dry fertilizer, rodent pellets, snail bait, weed or pest sprays, or other systemic poisons in the enclosure or on grass lawns that your tortoise may feed on. If you need to control pests, ask your pest control company for safe alternatives.

**Q: Can I catch any diseases from my tortoise?**

A: Many pets, including tortoises, will normally carry the bacteria salmonella. Adults and children should wash their hands with soap and water after handling a tortoise to prevent the spread of bacteria.

**More information**

If you have other questions or require more information, visit [www.azgfd.gov/tortoise](http://www.azgfd.gov/tortoise), email [TAP@azgfd.gov](mailto:TAP@azgfd.gov) or call (844) 896-5730.