

Box Turtle Care Sheet



What is a box turtle? Box turtles, by definition, have a moveable hinge on the lower shell that allows them to retract inside the shell and then completely close up, leaving no flesh exposed.

American box turtles can be beautiful and personable pets. Unfortunately, many of these wonderful animals die because of poor care. Please do not take box turtles from the wild. Their numbers are dwindling because of habitat loss and pressure from the pet trade. Pet stores sell wild caught turtles almost exclusively, so these should also be avoided. Check breeders and dealers lists at herp.com and herpindex.com for captive bred box turtles. (The beautiful captive bred ornate box turtle [above] was purchased from Central Florida Reptile Farm.) Or check with local rescue organizations for turtles needing homes.

Housing:

Box turtles tend to do well either outdoors, or in a large indoor enclosure. Many people do keep them in tiny aquariums, but it is a rather sad existence, in my opinion. One type of indoor container that actually works quite well is a large Rubbermaid tub. Rubbermaid tubs and specially built wooden boxes have an advantage over glass aquariums because they have opaque sides. Some box turtles will obsessively try to get through the glass to get to the larger area that they can see on the other side. Others become frightened by any activity in the room and will not relax until the sides are covered.

If you live within the natural range of any of the American box turtles, you should seriously consider an outdoor setup with sun, shade, a variety of weeds, and a small pond of water that is deep enough for swimming. Turtles are happier and healthier under these conditions. Some type of protection is required to prevent raccoons, dogs, or other predators from entering the enclosure.

Substrate:

One substrate that works well is a combination of potting soil, sand, leaf mulch and sphagnum moss. When misted every day, it holds humidity well. A product called "Bed-a-Beast" is recommended by many people for the same reason.

Burrowing into the substrate and/or hiding under a hollow log or "cave" of some sort makes box turtles feel secure. Just a small cardboard box will work fine, but a variety of logs and caves are sold at many pet stores. You should also make the substrate deep enough for the turtle to burrow completely under.

Flat rocks in one area will help keep the turtle's toenails in good shape.

All box turtles need high humidity. Dry air can cause eye irritation and even respiratory illness. It can literally kill a box turtle. Even the so-called desert box turtles (*Terrapene ornata luteola*) do their best to avoid dry air. They burrow into moist soil and come out at dawn and dusk when dew moistens everything at ground level, and become highly active in rain. Thoroughly mist the

terrarium every day. Your turtle is likely to be most eager to eat right after being misted. Keeping potted plants in the terrarium will offer a comforting natural look, and also help maintain high humidity.

Water:

Box turtles enjoy wading and soaking in water, so provide some sort of pool. They will often defecate in their water container, and that helps keep the enclosure clean, if the water is replaced daily. Box turtles kept indoors should be placed in water to soak every day. Box turtles may be clumsy swimmers, but many of them do seem to enjoy it if a deeper pond is available in an outdoor enclosure. Some box turtles will swim in an outdoor pond for over an hour almost every warm day. Others just wade and soak in the shallow end. Make sure there is an easy exit so a swimming box turtle does not become exhausted. Also, cold water can disable a turtle that falls in or enters to swim. A warm water pond with an easy exit will be appreciated by many American box turtles and poses no significant danger of drowning.

Feeding:

American Box turtles are omnivores and will enjoy fruits, fungi, veggies, greens, mollusks, worms and insects. From research with wild turtles, we know they eat plants for almost half the diet and animal foods for a little bit over half the diet. They are opportunistic feeders, willing to eat almost anything edible that they find. So focus on using a wide variety of foods. Feed the turtle on a flat rock rather than from dishes of any kind. This more natural approach will prevent the beak and toenails from becoming overgrown. Provide a high calcium source all the time--e.g. cuttlebone, boiled eggshells, plaster block--so that the turtle can munch when it feels the need for more calcium.

If your turtle is reluctant to eat, try soaking and misting before feeding. Make sure the turtle is warm enough, and well lighted. Reluctant feeders can often be enticed with live food such as an earthworm or slug, or colorful foods such as strawberries or cantaloupe. Stinky foods, such as canned cat food, can be useful in getting a reluctant turtle eating. (However, cat food is not a good food for frequent use.) Sick turtles will usually not eat well, so if the turtle refuses to eat for more than two weeks, seek veterinary care.

As an example of a good, healthy meal for a box turtle, try a salad of chopped grapes, dandelion, and grated carrot, and add a delightful topping of earthworm. This should convince your turtle that you are a good provider. A couple days later, try a mushroom and a strawberry on a turnip leaf, with a few sowbugs on top, lightly garnished with calcium powder. Mmm, mmm, good! Do not use the same food for two feedings in a row. And you really don't need to feed a "balanced meal" each time. Using a wide variety of foods over time will balance the diet in a more natural way.

Box turtles can get into unhealthy "addictions" if fed the same food frequently. Use a very wide variety of foods and don't feed the same items two feeding in a row. Avoid overuse of live

wiggly foods, as this is a common cause of picky eating habits. Additionally, make sure to provide cuttlebone or other source of calcium, so that the turtle can self-regulate calcium intake.

Lighting:

Good lighting is important physiologically and psychologically. Reptiles need access to direct sunlight or a replacement source of UV-B rays, e.g. ReptiSun or Reptile D-Light, available at petstores. An additional incandescent bulb is needed for its warmth and light. Set the incandescent bulb so that it warms one area of the terrarium to about 85F. Allow another section of the habitat to remain cooler. Turtles that do not see light for at least 12 hours a day can stop eating and become inactive. (Black lights or other special basking lights are not necessary, in spite of what pet store sales people might tell you.)

Temperature:

Box turtles do well at a wide range of temperatures. Indoors, no additional heat (other than a warming lightbulb during the day) is necessary. Outdoor enclosures must provide a way for the turtle to avoid extreme heat (heavy shade in at least one area, deep burrowing capability, and a pond.) Twice daily sprinkling may be required in hot, arid regions. In areas where overnight temperatures are likely to drop below 60°F., a ceramic heater (available at pet stores) may help keep the turtle comfortable in one area of the enclosure. Indoor habitats should provide a cool area and a warm area. During the day, keep one area at about room temperature (68-72F.) with a basking area as warm as 85 (maximum). Overnight temps can drop to about 60 and 75 (maximum).