Greek Tortoise

(Testudo graeca)

Care Sheet

Greek tortoises are naturally found in North Africa, southwest Asia and southern Europe, the Greek tortoise inhabits a variety of spaces. Rocky hillsides, Mediterranean scrub, forests, fields and meadows are all occupied by the tortoises according to subspecies. Some habitats are particularly arid. A highly domed carapace joins the singly hinged plastron by a thick bridge. Its colors are yellow-gold to dark brown or black. Flecks, borders, rays and spots on the shell produce a pattern reminiscent of a Greek mosaic, hence the name “Greek tortoise”. One to three raised scales, spurs or tubercles are located at either side of the tail on each thigh. This gives way for a second name, "Mediterranean spur-thigh tortoise". The head is blunt with large eyes and the arms exhibit large scales and thick, powerful claws. The supracaudal shield just above the tail is undivided.

Several subspecies are recognized which has enabled a high amount of confusion in proper identification of captive specimens. More familiar forms of the Greek tortoise are:

Ibera Greek tortoise (Testudo graeca ibera)

Libyan Greek tortoise (Testudo graeca cyrenaica)

North African Greek tortoise (Testudo graeca graeca)

Golden Greek tortoise (Testudo graeca ssp)

Tunisian Greek tortoise (Testudo graeca nabulensis)

Size

These tortoises are typically a small to medium sized animal with some exceptions. Depending on subspecies, they will grow to between 5 and 8”. Some examples of T. g. ibera will attain very large dimensions such as 10-11”, but this is rare. Males are found to be the smaller of the sexes but again, there are exceptions. At hatching, most Greek tortoises are no more than an inch in length. They can grow rapidly when over fed and reports of them reaching 4” in less than two years is common but not recommended.

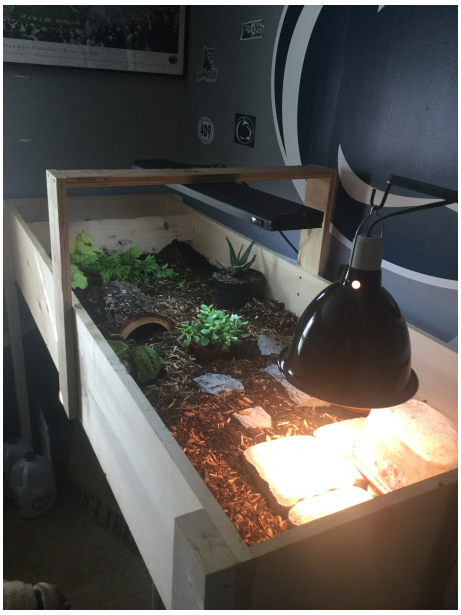
Life Span

Testudo graeca are known to be some of the longest lived of the tortoises. Reports suggest well into the 100s. In the wild, many do not live passed the age of twenty due to predation and other factors. When kept safe and under optimum conditions, they thrive and can live to a ripe old age. Some have outlived their keepers.

Caging

Housing Greek tortoises outdoors in a naturalistic pen is always best. During the warmer part of the year, these hatchlings can be kept in spacious enclosure with a hide boxes, clean water, and make sure they are well planted with edible vegetation and receive plenty of time in natural, full sun. Make sure the enclosure is covered as a hatchling so no predators have access to them. There are plenty of good ideas on line on how to build an outdoor enclosure for hatchlings.

Indoors, the construction of a tortoise table will suit the needs of these creatures well. A 2 foot by 3 foot unit made of ply wood will suffice for a few hatchlings. Wood is always recommended over glass so that the tortoises cannot see out. This way they will learn their boundaries and it will lessen their attempts to escape. If wood is not available, using a large Rubbermaid container will also work. If you want to use a glass tank, make sure there are plenty of distractions in the tank so its as natural as possible



Lighting, Temperature and Humidity

As always, natural sunlight should be utilized whenever possible and the tortoises fully benefit in many ways from being exposed to it. One of the most critical factors in caring for tortoises in captivity is providing them with proper heating and UVB lighting. When housing them inside, proper lighting is essential for keeping them healthy. Their lighting needs change as they age. Younger tortoises need different exposure than adults. Bulbs which provide UVA, UVB and heat are a personal favorite for adults. A 100-150 watt bulb is installed on one end of the indoor unit and this makes for a perfect basking area. It also lights up the enclosure nicely. For hatchlings under 1 years old, I prefer different lighting.

For hatchlings under a year old i use a 10.0 UVB emitting fluorescent tube bulb and a 100-150 basking bulb. The UVB bulb should be fixed across the top of the enclosure. Do NOT use a coiled UVB, as this cause eye damage in hatchling tortoises. It emits too much UVB in one concentrated area and essentially "burns" their eyes. Their eyes swell up and crust over. As soon as the coil light is removed their eyes go back to normal within 72 hours, but if not managed correctly it could cause permanent damage. A 100-150 watt basking light should also be placed at one end only to offer the tortoises a basking site of around 90-95F. Use a lamp stand to make sure the heat is directly above the enclosure. The stand allows for height change, which will help you control the temperature. If its too warm, just raise the stand a little. Depending on the size of the enclosure, you may want to use more than one basking light to offer the tortoises multiple basking areas, but be sure the occupants always have an area where they can escape the direct light and heat. They may however not use the basking area too frequently if they are newborns. Remember, they know they are vulnerable and instinct tells them to hide as much as possible. Hatchlings shouldn't be in a large enclosure until at least a year old. The tortoises should be subjected to 12-14 hours of heat light each day regardless of age. Their UVB light should be limited to under 3 hours a day. I only keep my UVB lights on for 1-3 hours a day. Too much UVB is worse than not enough. UVB is absorbed quicker than it can be reabsorbed, and it can cause your baby tortoise to be lethargic, which would indirectly cause dehydration.

Humidity is crucial in properly housing Greek tortoises long term. Dehydration is a real threat especially in artificial conditions. A humidity level of around 70% is needed and this can be achieved by offering the tortoises a proper substrate, a constant supply of fresh water and regular, light mistings with a spray bottle. Greeks of all ages ages will appreciate a "fake rain" through means of misting or spraying them down. They will walk with their bodies held high, extend their heads and necks into the "rain" and drink from little puddles or from the beads of water that form on the walls of the enclosure. I also recommend using a humid hide box. This is described below in detail. By keeping the babies well hydrated and at a sufficient humidity level, they will grow smoothly and keep good weight. Room temperature should hover around 75-85F during the day and can be allowed to drop into the low 70s at night. Ibera Greeks are capable of withstanding much cooler nighttime temperatures but if they are very young, it's wise to not let it drop that low just yet. Additional heat sources like heat pads or rocks are terrible for tortoises and should never be used. Another common misconception is when keepers panic and feel that their "babies" need additional heat at night. This is how heat rocks and pads end up being used and how tortoises can die from them. It's a "no brainer" to know that the indoor set up should not be near a drafty area such as window or in a cold room.

Humid Hide box

Using small tuberware container, cut a small whole in the side, large enough for your hatchling to crawl through. Fill the container with mixture of wet moss and sphagnum moss. Put the lid on the container and place the box under or near the heat lamp. This will keep your hatchling warm while being in a humid environment. Always make sure the moss is very damp.

Substrate

The best possible substrates for housing Russian tortoises indoors is cypress mulch. You can also mix in some plain organic top soil or natural reptile bedding. Im not a big fan of coco substrate, but you can use coco shavings and ecco earth. They tend to dry out very quickly and cause eye issues, so make sure they stay damp. Do not use rabbit pellets as they do not hold humidity well and mold will grow quickly in soiled areas. *****Cedar and pine bedding are an absolute NO, as they are toxic to tortoises.

Food

A variety of food is best for hatchlings. You can feed collard greens, arugula, romaine, escarole, baby romaine, mustard greens, kale (once a week), spring mix (remove the spinach), sweat pea salad mix, dandelion leaves, pear cactus, spineless cactus pads, and hibiscus flowers and leaves. Romaine and iceberg lettuce are good once in a while, it helps with hydration. Don't make romaine or iceberg lettuce a staple daily food. In the wild, Russian tortoises spend much of their time grazing on edible landscape. For this reason, it is an excellent and healthy idea to offer weeds such as Dandelion, clover, plantain, hawksbit, cat's ear, and thistle. When these items are not available like during the winter months, they can be replaced by dried, bagged organic herbs, which can be found online. Store bought greens like collards, mustards, kale and turnip can be offered sparingly. Commercial diets such as Mazuri (original), Lugarti tortoise pellets, and reptcal pellets are excellent for helping the tortoises maintain good weight but again should be offered only in moderation. Bee pollen is a good idea to sprinkle only once a week other food. Bee pollen is packed with protein, amino acids, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, enzymes, carotenoids, bioflavonoids and lipids.For calcium intake, I choose to not force it on the tortoises. The all too familiar practice of dusting each meal with calcium powder can cause long term problems down the road. Instead, a constant supply of cuttle-bone is kept in every enclosure with tortoises of all ages. The animals will nibble the bone as they feel the need. Adults, particularly females, will use the cuttle bone more often than males or neonates. Only occasionally will we dust the food items with powder. In the case of growing youngsters and gravid females we may do this twice weekly. Phosphorus free calcium powder and cuttle-bone can be purchased at most pet stores or in bulk online.

Foods NOT to feed

Spinach, this causes uric acid build up too quickly. So if you're going to buy spring mix, make sure you remove the spinach. No weeds with insecticides. Stay away from fruit until it is older. The sugar in the fruit can be harmful and cause bacteria to grow in their gut, which could delay digestion. When in doubt, search on line to see if the food is toxic to tortoises.

Water

Many Greek tortoises derive from extremely arid habitats while others are found in more temperate locations. Regardless of their origin, they all need to stay hydrated. A shallow water dish should be available to them at all times for drinking and soaking and should be changed frequently. Tortoises defecate in water so keeping the supply clean is a must. A small terra-cotta plant saucer will work just fine. Just make sure it is level with the substrate so the hatchlings have access.

don't forget, they also appreciate occasional misting of their environment to mimic a rain storm. This prompts them to empty their bowels and drink.

Handling and Temperament

As with any turtle or tortoise, Greeks do not like to be held. By nature, these tortoises are low to the ground therefore; they should be picked up when absolutely necessary. Soaks, cleaning of the enclosure and health checks are reasons for handling. While they tend to become very responsive to their keepers and will approach you for food, they should not be over-handled by any means. They are an easy-going, friendly and interactive species but like all reptiles, should never be overly stressed.

Soaking

It is very important to soak your hatchling daily in lukewarm (90°F) water. Use a small tuberware container, smaller the better as it is easier to control the water temperature. As long as the hatchling can turn completely around in the container, it is big enough. The depth of water should be just enough to cover its tail and slightly above the side of its shell. Soak for 10 minutes, but change water often so the water temperature stays lukewarm. Soaking will keep the hatchling hydrated, it will also help with keeping your enclosure clean as the hatchling will soil during its soak.