

# Care Cards

## Semi-Aquatic Turtles



Semi-aquatic turtles make great pets either for the beginning owner or an experienced herper. Many species are available through the pet trade and most are captive born. Before choosing a turtle, you should find out as much about the species as possible. This will help you first decide if you will be able to properly maintain the animal, and second what the adult size will be. A beginning turtle keeper should not be over ambitious, single turtles do much better than pairs or groups. Multiple turtles will compete for food and require a larger enclosure. Additionally, some turtles can be cannibalistic and nibble on the toes or tail of others in the group.

While a pond is the proper enclosure for a turtle, most owners will either choose an aquarium or a large plastic tub. Never try to raise a turtle in a round plastic dish with an island in the middle and a fake palm tree on the island. This is too small and totally unacceptable for proper housing (they do make a nice candy dish). In general, the larger the enclosure the better the water quality. Remember, semi-aquatic turtles poop in the same water they live in. A smaller enclosure will result in a heavier concentration of pathogenic bacteria. Most turtles can be maintained in a 10-gallon aquarium for the first year, but should be provided a larger enclosure as soon as possible. A long or show aquarium is preferred over a tall or high one. The water should be at least as deep as the

turtle is wide to allow room to flip over if necessary. Ultimately, the deeper the water, the more the turtle will have to swim and play. A substrate is not necessary and will actually make cleaning more difficult. Likewise, aquatic plants will usually either be eaten or destroyed by the turtle.

The enclosure should have a place for the turtle to climb out of the water for basking and rest. They can simply be a piece of cork bark or driftwood, a stack of rocks, or a walled off area filled with dirt and sand. When using rocks make sure the surface is smooth to prevent unnecessary wear and damage to the turtles plastron. An incandescent, full spectrum light should be located over the basking area. The light should not be any closer than 6 inches from the turtle to prevent thermal damage. A 50-75 watt bulb is sufficient unless there is a large distance between the light and the animal. To see if the light is strong enough, place a thermometer in the basking area. The temperature should be 85-95°F. A normal day/night cycle can be easily obtained using an automatic timer on the light. The day cycle should vary between 10 and 14 hours depending on the time of year.

A heater should be provided to help maintain a comfortable water temperature. I prefer using a submersible heater for my turtle. The water temperature should be 72-76°F for adult turtles and slightly warmer for hatchlings and juveniles. Inappropriate water temperature will lead to unnecessary stress and ill health for your turtle. Additionally, I strongly recommend some type of water filter for the enclosure. Filtered water will stay cleaner on a day-to-day basis than frequent water changes. Several varieties of filters are available, the two most commonly used filters are either a fully submersible unit with some type of sponge filter, or a canister filter.





dried flies or shrimp. As with any reptile, the more varied the diet the more nutritionally complete. Hatchling and juvenile turtles should be fed daily, while adults need only be fed every other day. Overfed turtles will become obese and will not be able to fully retract their head or legs within their shell. If a well balanced diet is provided, your turtle should not require any additional supplementation. I do recommend a vitamin and calcium supplement be used on hatchlings and breeding females.



Turtles, like all reptiles, carry *Salmonella* bacteria within their intestinal tract. When a turtle goes to the bathroom the *Salmonella* organism is released into its environment (usually the water). As the turtle swims in the water, its body becomes coated with the bacteria. Because of this certain safety guidelines should be followed. Always thoroughly wash your hands with antibacterial soap after handling the turtle, the enclosure or any enclosure accessories. Never handle your turtle while eating, drinking or smoking. Do not kiss your turtle or place it in your mouth. Do not rub your eyes or mouth when handling your turtle or cleaning any soiled items.



Food for turtles will vary depending on the specific species being kept. The most commonly fed items include earthworms, small fish, crickets, and low-fat dog food. Vegetable items readily consumed by many turtles include romaine or red-leaf lettuce (never iceberg), fresh greens, and freshly chopped mixed vegetables. Many prepared turtle diets are also available, they are either pellets or sticks that should be softened prior to feeding. Additionally, many "treat" type items are also available such as

