



Leopard Tortoises

Stigmochelys pardalis

INTERMEDIATE · 12–18 IN ADULT · 50–100 YR · DIURNAL · EASTERN & SOUTHERN AFRICA

A leopard tortoise is a grazing animal with a spectacular shell attached. They come from the savanna and grasslands of eastern and southern Africa, they work in daylight, and they spend it walking and eating grass. The honest headline is scale in two directions: a hatchling that fits your palm becomes a 30 to 50 pound animal that needs a yard, and it may well outlive the person who bought it.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Ambient temp	78–88 °F
Basking spot	90–100 °F
Night low	68–75 °F
Humidity	30–50%
UVB	High output, required
Diet	Daily grasses, hay, greens
Adult size	12–18 in
Lifespan	50–100 years



Captive-bred leopard tortoises fill breeder tables at NARBC shows. The blotched shell that gives the species its name is the giveaway.

Photo: Shaun Swanepoel / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

What You're Signing Up For

Leopard tortoises are calm, undramatic animals that rarely bite and never really want to be picked up. They are walkers and grazers, and the best thing you can do for one is give it ground and get out of the way. Handling is for health checks and moving day. Take the timeline literally as well. Fifty to a hundred years means this animal belongs in your will, not just your budget.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Floor space is everything and height is nearly nothing. Young tortoises do well in an open tortoise table or a closed chamber; racks are never appropriate. Adults belong outside in a secure pen of at least 12 by 12 feet, walled solid so they stop pushing at what they can see through. Keep them singly. Males ram and flip rivals, and a flipped tortoise in sun can die within hours; mixing tortoise species trades respiratory pathogens both ways.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×12	48×24×12	Keep it humid. A dry start is what pyramids a shell for life.
Juvenile	48×24×18	72×36×18	Slower growing than a sulcata, but the space demand still arrives.
Subadult	72×36×18	96×48×18	More cold-sensitive than a sulcata; night heat is not optional.
Adult	outdoor pen 12×12 ft	outdoor pen + heated shed	30–50 lbs of strict grazer; no burrowing, so warmth must come to them.

Minimums and preferred sizes from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Floor space is what counts here; height does nothing for a tortoise.

03

Heat & Light

Give a basking spot of 90–100 °F, ambient air of 78–88 °F, and a night floor of 68–75 °F. This species needs high-output UVB: a 10–12% T5 over any screen top, 12–15 in above the shell. Glass blocks UVB and mesh cuts it by a quarter to a half, so outdoor sun beats every bulb sold. Never a heat rock. Tortoises take burns from below without moving off. Leopards don't burrow, so they can't escape a cold snap the way a sulcata does. The outdoor pen needs a heated shelter they can walk into.

04

Humidity & Water

The pen runs dry, 30–50%, and a leopard tortoise resents standing damp. Hatchlings are the exception that catches people out. A dry start pyramids a shell permanently, so give young ones a humid hide with damp substrate under it. Every tortoise needs a shallow dish it can climb out of, plus a warm soak every week or so. They drink from it and they soil it, so it gets changed every time.

05

Substrate & Grazing Ground

Indoors, use a deep mix of topsoil and coconut coir, loose enough to scrape a form in but never loose sand, which young tortoises eat and impact on. Top the cool end with orchard grass hay. Outdoors the substrate is the point: sow the pen with grasses and safe weeds and let the animal harvest its own food. Add sight barriers, low logs and a gentle slope. A tortoise with somewhere to walk to walks.

06

Feeding

This is a grass eater, first and last. Daily grazing on grasses and safe weeds, backed by grass hay, leafy greens and the occasional flower. Dust with plain calcium, no D3, no phosphorus, at most feedings, plus a multivitamin weekly while growing and twice monthly as an adult. **Fruit and animal protein do not belong in a leopard tortoise.** A rich, low-fiber diet builds a lumpy pyramided shell and burdens the kidneys years later. Fresh hay in front of them at all times settles most of it.

07

Health Red Flags

Runny nose is the one to learn. Bubbling or crusted nostrils, wheezing, open-mouth breathing, or puffy eyes mean a respiratory infection, and it moves fast once nights run cold. A tortoise that refuses grass, sleeps through a warm afternoon, or strains without passing urates needs a reptile vet, not another week of observation. Weigh monthly. Pyramiding and steady weight loss are the setup telling on you.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.