



Russian Tortoises

Testudo horsfieldii

BEGINNER • 6–10 IN ADULT • 40–60 YR LIFESPAN • DIURNAL • CENTRAL ASIA

The Russian tortoise is the apartment-compatible tortoise: six to ten inches, tough as the Central Asian steppe it comes from, and charming in a way its drab shell doesn't advertise. It tolerates temperature swings that would hospitalize a tropical species and lives 40–60 years. Buy one, and you're likely writing it into your will. The species' whole personality is digging.

AT A GLANCE	
Ambient (day)	75–85 °F
Basking surface	95–100 °F
Night	60–70 °F
Humidity	30–50%
UVB	T5 HO 10–12% at 12–15 in
Diet	Weeds, greens, grasses
Feeding cadence	Daily fresh greens
Adult size	6–10 in
Lifespan	40–60 years



Russian tortoise. Small, solar-powered, and a more determined digger than any dog.

Photo: Kudaibergen Amirekul / iNaturalist · CC BY-SA

01

Choosing one: the three-point check

Many Russians in the trade are wild-caught imports, so choose deliberately: a healthy tortoise feels heavy for its size and pushes off your fingers with real strength; its eyes are clear, open and unswollen; its vent and shell rim are clean, with no smeared stool. Captive-bred juveniles from show breeders skip the import parasite lottery entirely. Pay the difference.

02

Housing by Life Stage

An open-topped tortoise table beats an aquarium. Glass walls confuse them into endless pacing. Indoors means the biggest footprint you can house with 6–8 inches of diggable substrate; outdoors is where the species shines, in a pen with walls sunk a foot below grade, because a Russian tortoise treats fencing as a suggestion and excavates like a professional.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	24×18×12	36×18×12	Strong UVB from day one; table beats tank.
Juvenile	48×24×12	48×24×18	Imports carry parasites. Vet check at purchase.
Subadult	48×24×18	72×36×18	The digging talent arrives before the size does.
Adult	72×36×18	Outdoor pen 4×8 ft+	Cold-hardy; outdoor keeping suits most of the year.

Habitat sizes (Habitat-OS life-stage guidance). Open-topped tables beat glass tanks.

03

Heat, UVB & genuine seasons

This steppe animal is built for swing. Bask at 95–100 °F under lamp or sun, ambient high 70s, and let nights fall to 60–70 °F. Indoors, run a T5 HO 10–12% tube 12–15 inches above the shell, nearer 15 on an open table, since screen mesh cuts output by a quarter to a half and glass blocks it outright. Outdoors, real sun does the job. Healthy, established adults brumate naturally in cold climates; that's an advanced-keeper project done with a vet check, not an accident in the garage.

04

Dry husbandry & water

Everything stays dry: 30–50% humidity, dry substrate, good drainage in outdoor pens. Chronic damp is this species' kryptonite. Hydration comes as a flat water saucer, weekly shallow soaks for growing juveniles, and moisture in the greens. On hot days outdoors they self-manage by digging into the cool earth.

05

Substrate, shelter & roommates

Six-plus inches of a sand-soil blend topped with cypress or leaf litter lets the tortoise do the thing it loves most: disappear. Cork slabs, grass clumps and a cool-end shelter give cover. On roommates: males are aggressive to each other, so one male per enclosure; even mixed groups need space and sight-breaks.

06

Feeding

Feed the lawn, not the fridge. Offer a varied leafy salad daily: dandelion, clover, plantain weeds, spring mix, romaine, opuntia pads. Dust plain calcium, D3-free and phosphorus-free, on most meals, with a reptile multivitamin weekly while growing and twice monthly for adults. Grass-eater pellets are a fine supplement. Fruit is an occasional treat at most, and high-protein anything is off the menu; a Russian's kidneys are built for weeds.

07

Health Red Flags

In a new import, assume parasites until a fecal exam says otherwise. The tell is weight loss with a good appetite. Runny nose syndrome follows damp or stressful housing. Pyramiding in juveniles means diet or humidity drifted. And the classic Russian emergency isn't illness at all: it's the empty pen with a tunnel under the wall. Audit your fencing like they audit it. Daily.

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.