



Sulcata Tortoises

Centrochelys sulcata

ADVANCED COMMITMENT · 24–30 IN · 80–150 LB · 70–100+ YRS · SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Buy a sulcata with your eyes open: the golf-ball hatchling becomes the third-largest tortoise on Earth, up to 150 pounds of cheerful bulldozer that outlives its buyer. As a yard animal in the right climate they are magnificent: outgoing, tame, weirdly charismatic. As an impulse buy they are the most-surrendered reptile in America. This sheet is the honest version.

AT A GLANCE	
Ambient (day)	80–90 °F
Basking surface	95–105 °F
Night	72–80 °F
Humidity	30–50% · higher for hatchlings
UVB	Required · T5 HO 12–15 in or sun
Diet	Grasses, hay, weeds, greens
Feeding cadence	Daily grazing
Adult size	24–30 in · 80–150 lb
Lifespan	70–100+ years



The world's third-largest tortoise. That cute sulcata hatchling is a 100-pound promise.

Photo: Bernard DUPONT / iNaturalist · CC BY-SA

01

Temperament & the strength problem

Sulcatas are friendly, food-driven, and strong out of all proportion. Adults rearrange landscaping, push through fences that 'looked solid,' and dig burrows that swallow a shovel. Babyproof the habitat: no ledges or objects they can climb and flip from, because a tortoise stranded on its back in the sun can die there. They rarely hide in the shell; expect an animal that walks up to see what you brought.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Indoors is a nursery phase, nothing more. A tortoise table serves the first years; after that the species needs a yard with a heated night shelter (a converted shed with a pig-blanket heater is the classic build) and fencing sunk below grade to beat the digging. Plan the adult habitat before buying the hatchling: every sulcata reaches it.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×12	48×24×12	Humid hide now prevents pyramided shell forever.
Juvenile	48×24×18	72×36×18	Growth is startling; outdoor time is critical.
Subadult	96×48×18	Outdoor pen	Will outgrow any indoor enclosure. All of them.
Adult	20×20 ft yard min	Acreage + heated shed	A livestock commitment, not a terrarium pet.

Habitat sizes (Habitat-OS life-stage guidance). Adults are outdoor animals, full stop.

03

Heat, UVB & sunshine

Indoors: basking at 95–105 °F, ambient 80s, night floor of 72 °F, and a high-output T5 UVB tube on top of the screen, 12 to 15 inches above the shell, for a basking UVI near 3 to 4. Never closer than 10 inches: that burns eyes and skin. Mesh costs a quarter to half the UVB and glass blocks it outright, so a lamp behind either is decoration. Outdoors the sun does both jobs better, which is half the argument for outdoor keeping. UVB drives the D3 that fills that shell; skimp and it shows forever.

04

The humidity paradox

Adults are dry-country animals at 30–50%, but **hatchlings raised bone-dry pyramid**. The smooth dome becomes stacked, bumpy scutes that never flatten. Give babies a humid hide they sleep in nightly, plus a warm shallow soak a few times weekly. Dry adult, humid nursery: it looks contradictory and it's correct.

05

Substrate & shelter

Dry soil or a soil-sand blend indoors with a hay pile at the cool end for burrowing into; outdoors, plain earth they will landscape themselves. Water lives in a flat, buried saucer that can't tip. Shelters (cork slabs, straw piles, and eventually the heated shed) sit at the cool end, never under the lamps.

06

Feeding: fiber or failure

This is a grazing machine: grass, grass hay, and weeds should be the overwhelming bulk of the diet, topped with dark greens and cactus pads. Dust the greens with plain calcium (no D3, no phosphorus) at most feedings, plus a multivitamin weekly while growing and twice monthly as an adult; UVB makes the D3, not the powder. Fruit is rare-to-never; dog food, cat food, and other rich proteins are off the table. High-protein diets drive renal disease and deformed growth. If in doubt, feed more hay.

07

Health Red Flags

Pyramiding announces a dry, low-fiber childhood. Fix the humidity and diet now; the shell keeps score forever. A flipped tortoise is an emergency of minutes in the sun. Runny nose syndrome (chronic nasal discharge) follows stress or damp cold housing. And the biggest flag flies before purchase: if a 100-pound, 80-year yard animal doesn't fit your life, admire someone else's; rehome through ttpg.org, never the local pond.

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.