

Basic Aquatic Turtle Care Sheet

Slider, Cooter, Redbelly, Painted, Map, and Chicken Turtles

By Katrina Smith

Do you have a red-eared slider or other aquatic turtle, or are you thinking of getting one? Not sure of how to care for it? The information here is to help you get started in the world of aquatic turtles. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Some recommended websites and books can help you learn more.

WARNING: Any reptile has the potential to carry salmonella. Always wash hands after handling a turtle or touching any equipment that comes into contact with the turtle or the enclosure. In most states, it is illegal to release a pet turtle, particularly a red-eared slider or non-native turtle.

Aquatic turtles, such as sliders, painteds, redbellies, cooters, chicken turtles, map turtles, and terrapins all need the same basic supplies: **Large tank or fenced-in pond, basking spot, filter, food, hiding spots, and if indoors, a basking light (heat light), UVB light, and siphon.**

Tank/Pond: For adult aquatic turtles, a 40 gallon breeder aquarium or LARGER is preferred, with outdoor ponds in enclosed yards being ideal. Female aquatics in particular need ponds in yards due to their large adult size. **A good rule of thumb is roughly 10 gallons of enclosure per inch of turtle shell.** Using this example, an adult female slider needs AT LEAST a 75-gallon tank, and an adult male slider needs from a 40-gallon to a 75-gallon tank, depending on his size. Rubbermaid stock tanks, found at farm supply stores, are cheaper than aquariums, and cost less than a dollar per gallon. They come in 50, 100, 150, and 300 gallon sizes. They aren't as pretty as aquariums, but they can be decorated, and they weigh much less than a glass tank of the same size, and are less likely to break or leak.

For juvenile aquatic turtles, a ten-gallon to forty-gallon tank is needed. Although a ten-gallon is acceptable for new hatchlings, depending on the individual animal (but NO turtle should live permanently in a ten gallon aquarium or even a 20-gallon aquarium), it's best to start with the largest size possible. A 20-gallon tank should last about a year or two with a hatchling before the turtle outgrows it.

Water depth should be at least as deep as the shell is long, although it can be much deeper. Sliders and other aquatics were designed to live in ponds and lakes, so they can handle deep water so long as they have proper basking spots and underwater resting spots. Indoor ponds and aquariums require a **haul-out spot** (also called a basking spot), a heat light over a basking spot, a UVB light (such as Reptisun 5.0) over the basking spot, a high-powered filter, and occasionally a water heater (depending on how cold your room is). Some households do not need a tank heater so long as the turtles can get under a basking spot whenever they choose. A **heat light** – at one end only - is a MUST indoors! You don't want to overheat a hatchling or small turtle, but there should be a light over the basking spot to provide a thermogradient. A simple household light bulb in a "dome" fixture, set on top of a screen or hung from the ceiling, works fine for a heat light – the wattage will depend on the size of the turtle and how close the light is to the basking spot.

Outdoor ponds must be in an **escape-proof yard or the pond itself must be escape-proof.** Outdoor winter hibernation is allowed depending on the size of the pond, the species involved, and your winter temperatures. Ponds must be dug below the frost line so that they do not freeze solid. A floating heater or a running water pump will help keep a portion of the surface open for oxygen exchange in the winter. Generally, you'll need at least 300 gallons to allow hibernation, and two adult sliders will need at least 300 gallons of space. If the turtle can hibernate in your temperature zone, (this includes much of the mid-Atlantic for sliders) the turtle can be added for the first time to an outdoor pond between mid-May and mid-September, so they have time to acclimate before winter sets in.

Filter: Canister filters are more expensive than over-the-tank filters, but do a better job, and are worth the money in the long run. Small submersible filters will work for very small juvenile turtles, but the turtle will quickly outgrow those. A filter is a must for indoor turtles!

Basking Spot: An aquatic turtle needs a place where he can climb out of the water completely to dry off and warm up under a heat lamp and UVB light. I do not recommend stacking rocks or piling up gravel for a basking spot. This takes up too much room in the water, and rocks can lead to abrasions on the shell, which can then lead to infection. Floating cork bark is one alternative, and can be purchased on-line or at specialty aquarium stores. "Turtle Docks" are pre-formed floating basking sites that attach to the aquarium glass with suction cups. These can be purchased in pet stores or on-line, but these "docks" may be eaten by some turtles, and will sink under large adults. For large adult sliders and cooters, you might want to consider a home-made basking spot made of cork bark attached to a PVC frame, or Plexiglass attached to a frame. A type of plastic screen light diffuser, called egg-crate screening, can be cut to create a very inexpensive yet durable basking spot for an aquarium of any size. The pieces are put together with electrical zip ties. The zip ties and egg-crate can be found at home improvement stores.

For indoor turtles, make sure that a heat and UVB light is on over the basking spot for **14 hours a day**, to simulate summer hours and temperatures. A Reptisun 5.0 light should be within 12" of the basking spot. A heat light should be roughly 10" from the basking spot, although this may vary with the wattage of the light and the size of the turtle. You can use a thermometer to make sure your basking spot is 85-90°F.

Recommended foods: NOTE: AQUATIC TURTLES ONLY EAT IN THE WATER

Feed hatchlings daily. Turtles that are roughly 3-5 inches can be fed every other day. Very large adults can be fed three times a week. Offer an amount of pellets roughly the size of the turtle's head. Greens can be offered at any time. Turtles are great at begging, so they may always seem hungry.

- Reptomin Pellets (in most pet stores), Mazuri pellets, or Turtle Brittle from <http://www.enasco.com/prod/Home>. Reptomin is found in almost any pet store, and it's a great food for hatchlings. Hatchlings cannot eat Mazuri or Turtle Brittle - the pellets are too large for them.
- Greens should be offered occasionally (Romaine or leaf lettuces, collards, dandelion, etc., but no iceberg lettuce). Thin slices of carrot or sweet potato can be offered, too.
- Earthworms, insects, and occasional treats of pieces of plain COOKED meat such as shrimp, chicken or fish are acceptable as part of the diet. Never offer raw meat.
- For juvenile turtles that won't eat, try frozen "blood worms" (mosquito larvae) sold in little packs in the fish food section of most pet stores. Small crickets and pieces of earthworms are often readily accepted by stressed-out, newly acquired turtles.

Siphons: You'll need a siphon to change the water, usually every other week, although the timing will depend on the quality of your filter. I recommend Python siphons, available in most pet stores or from Drs. Smith and Foster. It hooks up to the bathroom sink or outside faucet and drains and fills the tank without you ever having to touch the water or needing a bucket. Again, these are a bit expensive, but they last for years and make cleaning a large tank much, much easier. For very large tanks or indoor ponds, a small utility pump and two hoses can drain 75 gallons in about 10 minutes.

Hiding Spots: Turtles enjoy having an area where they can feel safe from predators, and they're more likely to eat if they have a hiding spot. Artificial silk plants, from the dollar store, Wal-Mart, or a craft store, can be put into the water to act as hiding spots and to add color to the tank. A dollar store silk plant works just as well as a hiding spot than an expensive plastic plant from a pet store. Rinse the plant well and let it soak in water over night before adding it to the tank.

Many supplies, such as a "Turtle Dock" for basking, Reptisun 5.0 UVB lights, food, and a siphon can be ordered on the Internet. Websites include Drs. Foster and Smith <http://www.drsofostersmith.com> (or call 1-800-381-7179 to request a catalog).

If you just brought home your turtle, it may not eat for two or three days due to stress. However, if you have a basking light, clean water, and a hide spot, and your turtle won't eat after three days, it could be sick. Check at

www.anapsid.com or with your local reptile club to see if there is a veterinarian in your area that will see turtles.

Recommended Websites and Books:

<http://www.turtleforum.com>

<http://www.austinsturtlepage.com/>

<http://www.chelonia.org/Articles/basiccarebasking.htm>

<http://www.turtlepuddle.org/>

<http://www.matts-turtles.org> Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society

<http://www.angelfire.com/il3/janice/pondconstruction/construction.html>

shows how to build a pond and has links to ponding sites

http://www.turtlepuddle.org/health/small_tank_filter.html has some great ideas for aquariums.

[The General Care and Maintenance of Red-Eared Sliders](#) by Philippe de Vosjoli from Advanced Vivarium Systems, Santee, CA (1992), available in most pet stores

Turtle Facts

- Sliders and other aquatics can live 20 years or more, and some individuals have lived over 60 years.
- Turtles DO NOT “grow to the size of their tank”. Each species reaches a different size. Female sliders, maps, cooters, terrapins, and painted turtles grow larger than males, and if cared for properly, female sliders can reach 8-12 inches, while males reach 6-8 inches. Painted turtles and map turtles get slightly smaller than sliders, and cooters and redbellies get slightly larger than sliders.
- Adult males sliders, cooters, and painted turtles and some species of map turtles have much longer front nails and longer, thicker tails than females.
- Size affects sexual maturity more than age.
- You can determine gender when a slider's shell is roughly 3.5 - 4.25 inches long. Incubation temperatures determine gender, so if the breeder knows the incubation temperatures, the gender can be predicted, but not known for certain, before this size.
- For painted turtles, gender is usually evident by 3 inches, and for cooters or redbellies, by 5 inches.
- Indoor turtles don't HAVE to hibernate during the winter, but most aquatic turtles CAN hibernate in outdoor ponds if the pond is deep enough. Hibernation is a process that has specific temperatures over a period of time - it doesn't happen over night and doesn't happen at room temperatures.
- Turtles don't always need "company", "a buddy", or "a friend" to be happy. One turtle is just fine by himself in a tank. Although turtles prefer to bask in large groups in the wild, indoor aquariums are usually too small for two turtles. If the tank is too small, turtles will fight each other. There's also no guarantee that two turtles will get along, even if there is enough space.
- It is illegal to release a pet turtle into "the wild" or into native waters. A backyard pond should be fenced in to prevent a pet turtle from escaping. Red-Eared Sliders are not native to the mid-Atlantic area. However, because so many pet sliders have been released, they can be found in most of our area, and could be out-competing native turtles for resources.
- Not all veterinarians will (or are even qualified to) see turtles, although a yearly check-up is a good idea for your pet turtle. Please contact your local reptile society if you need help finding a qualified veterinarian.