

# GCTTS Box Turtle Care Sheet

## Introduction

This care sheet has information on the care of Eastern Box (*Terrapene carolina carolina*), Three Toed Box (*Terrapene carolina triunguis*), Gulf Coast Box (*Terrapene carolina major*), Florida Box (*Terrapene carolina bauri*), Ornate Box (*Terrapene ornata ornata*), and Desert Box (*Terrapene ornata luteola*) turtles.

Learn all that you can about box turtles before you obtain one. Seek out other box turtle enthusiasts. Talk with your vet. Join a group such as the [Gulf Coast Turtle and Tortoise Society](#) or the East Texas Herpetological Society. If you have a computer and internet access, read the rec.pets.herp USENET group and subscribe to the HERP-L list.

Try to obtain captive-bred box turtles for pets. These will generally be healthier and better adapted to captivity than wild caught turtles. Wild populations are under tremendous pressure from the pet trade - don't add to this pressure.

Before deciding to acquire a box turtle, remember that turtles are very long lived animals and require specialized, sometimes expensive, care. They do not make good pets for young children unless there is adult supervision.

## Housing

The only suitable habitat for box turtles is a large outdoor enclosure, bounded by bricks, landscape timbers, or cement blocks at least 18 inches high with an overhanging ledge to prevent climbing out. Drainage must be built into the pen unless it is a hardware cloth (wire) type pen. The habitat should provide a variety of environments including sunny and shaded areas and places to hide. Turtles are poikilothermic, regulating their temperature by behavior, and need to have a choice between sun and shade. A pile of hay provides an ideal hiding/shady place. Flat stones or other rough surfaces in the enclosure will help control overgrown toenails. During the winter a large, well drained, pile of hay or leaves will be used for hibernation. Being outdoors provides a better diet since the turtle can supplement what you feed it with snails, slugs, earthworms, weeds, etc. If you keep your pet in your garden area, you will not need to worry about snails and slugs as pests (of course, you might find some strawberries missing!).

Box turtles are in the same family (Emydidae) as water turtles such as sliders, map turtles, and cooters, and although not fully aquatic, do enjoy an occasional swim. A shallow pond, perhaps half as deep as the turtle's carapace is high, should be sunk into the ground and kept filled with fresh water. In any case, fresh drinking water must be provided daily.

Most diseases are spread through fecal contamination. The best way to reduce this is to provide adequate space for each turtle, thoroughly rinse the drinking

water containers each day, and provide a large enough water area. Box turtles usually use the toilet in their drinking water, so it must be large enough that another turtle does not drink the waste of another or take in a pathogen or parasite a sick turtle will put into the drinking water, should one of your turtles be sick or a healthy carrier and not yet showing obvious symptoms.

If an outdoor enclosure cannot be provided you should consider not keeping a box turtle. Temporary indoor housing can be used to overwinter a turtle that cannot be hibernated or during convalescence. Aquariums are generally not satisfactory for box turtles, although a large 'breeder' aquarium (lower sides and consequently more usable surface area for the same gallon capacity) can be used if necessary. Concrete mixing containers (made from tough plastic and available at Home Depot and Builder's Square) make an inexpensive, fairly spacious habitat. A typical container is 2' X 3' X 10" deep. Full spectrum fluorescent lighting such as a ZooMed Reptisun 5 is required. A clamp-on 75 - 100 Watt incandescent light fixture with a reflector should be used to provide a basking area that is warmer than the rest of the container. Ideal basking area temperature is 90 - 95F. Absorbent flooring material such as newspaper (not the colored sections), hay, or cypress mulch should be provided and changed regularly. Substrates that dry out or get powdery should be avoided. Cedar chips can be poisonous.

Box turtles can get dehydrated even if offered a water bowl to drink from. They really benefit from a full body soak [5]. A shallow water dish, large enough for the turtle to get into and soak, is required, as is an area that the turtle can hide in for a sense of security. An overturned, large clay flower pot can serve as the hide. Daytime high temperature of 85F is ideal, a nighttime low of 70F is OK.

If mature females are confined indoors for any length of time a 6" deep container of moist (not wet) sterile potting soil should be provided in case they need to lay eggs. Where ever you keep your box turtles try to maintain a female to male ratio of at least two to one to prevent the females from being overly harassed by the males.

## **Feeding**

Adult box turtles do quite well when fed about 3 times a week, and every other day to hatchlings. But, in the periods just before and after hibernation, turtles should be fed more frequently. Overfeeding may cause serious organ damage. Vary the diet and include some harder foods to help prevent beak overgrowth. Don't just feed them a few favorite foods, vary the diet using the suggestions below. Foods should be varied in texture as well. Healthy turtles should have good appetites but can become finicky eaters if overfed, making a balanced diet difficult.

Vitamin and mineral supplements are unnecessary if the diet is varied, and could be harmful. Too much calcium can mineralize vital organs and blood vessels and excesses of any one vitamin can cause a deficiency in others. The percentages in reptile vitamins sold may not be correct. Two drops of cod

liver oil twice a week is a natural source of vitamin A and can be safely used to supplement diet at that dosage. Egg shells can provide additional calcium if needed.

Too much fruit can alter the gut flora as well as setting the turtle up for nutritional imbalances.

Turtles housed outdoors in garden type habitats will feed naturally on snails, earthworms, insects, animal droppings, plants, etc. and are likely to get a good diet. Soil contains minerals a turtle may need, so allowing the turtle to feed naturally on the ground is preferable to using a plate.

When keeping turtles in an outdoor enclosure, it is important to feed in the morning and then remove the food. Leftover food may attract ants, and after dark may attract rats, opossum, raccoons, and other dangerous predators.

### **Protein Based Foods:**

(well over 50% of diet)

worms, all insects, cooked egg (with shell), pinkie mice, whole feeder fish (chopped), slugs, worms, snails, tadpoles, animal feces (animals must not be carrying internal parasites)

### **Fruits and Vegetables**

(Fruit should be about 10% of diet)

(Vegetables should be about 30% of diet)

peaches, figs, tomatoes, nectarines, mangoes, bell pepper, apricots, grapes, peas, strawberries, grapefruit, squash, other berries, oranges, zucchini, prickly pear pads (no spines), plum, other melons\*, carrots, asparagus, cherries, cantelope\*, kale, apple\*, banana, endive, pear\*, dandelions, okra, greens - varied, mushrooms, mulberries, persimmons, cherries, blackberries, blueberries

\* - no seeds

### **Foods to be limited or avoided:**

The following occasional treats must be limited to less than 5% of the diet due to a high phosphorus to calcium ratio or excessive vitamin D content:

corn on the cob, chicken, dog/cat food (low fat, moistened), liver, turtle food, meat, monkey chow, trout chow

Avoid the following foods that contain oxalic acid (can bind calcium) or which bind iodine (important for thyroid function): spinach, beets, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, kale, broccoli.

A more complete diet is available as our [Box Turtle Diet](#) sheet.

# Gulf Coast Turtle & Tortoise Society

For more information about the GCTTS or about the care of turtles and tortoises, call (281)443-3383, [E-mail](mailto:info@gctts.org) us (at info@gctts.org), or visit our [web site](http://www.gctts.org) (at www.gctts.org).

GCTTS meetings are open to the public and free.

Membership and care information is available at our meetings and on our web site.

## Contributors

Contributors to this care sheet include:

- Marlaina Barr
- Shelley Penrod
- Tracy Scannell
- Bob Smither
- Julie Young

## References

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