

The ABCs of Turtle and Tortoise Feeding

By Susan Tellem

Depending on the age and species, there are many variations on what to feed turtles and tortoises. To have a healthy animal, the basic rule of thumb is to try and feed your turtle or tortoise something similar to what he or she would find in the wild. Turtles need live food, while tortoises are vegetarians.



Turtles

In general, turtles are carnivores. In the wild, they like to hunt and bring home live food. Worms, snails, bugs, and other creepy crawlies all taste delicious to a turtle. So, we must provide live food for our captive turtles. Even if you are a vegetarian or are squeamish, you owe it to this little wild animal to provide healthy food. At American Tortoise Rescue, we feed snails and superworms to our turtles. We hunt down snails that have never been exposed to snail bait or pesticides. If you are not sure, keep the snails in a bucket with a mesh lid and feed them peanut butter for a few days. If they are not dead after a few days, they are OK to feed to your turtles.

If you don't have the time to hunt down snails, you can purchase superworms for adult turtles and mealworms for babies. We purchase superworms in bulk, but you can buy small containers of them at your local pet store. Feed as many superworms as your turtle can eat in one sitting (which might be as many as 12 to 15). Then, do not feed the turtle for a few days. The reason for this feeding schedule is that, in the wild, they do not eat every day; we are trying to mimic conditions in the wild and not overfeed them.

Turtles also like bananas, strawberries and greens like turnip greens, romaine lettuce, or dandelion greens. Don't feed your turtle cat or dog food because it has too much protein and can cause long-term damage to your turtle's health.

Water turtles are a different story – they can only eat underwater. While they enjoy some of the above, the best diet is a prepared turtle food like ReptoMin. Feed your water turtle once every other day. Supplement the diet with live goldfish (called feeder fish); water turtles must have these for the calcium that they provide.

Of course, when they hibernate, turtles do not eat for three to six months.

Tortoises

Tortoises, by and large, are vegetarians. Most (like desert tortoises) eat greens, but some (like red-foots) eat fruit and greens. A diet that is optimal for one type of tortoise may be harmful to another type. For example, you'll want to stay away from feeding fruit

to a desert tortoise, sulcata or other desert-type tortoises. Fruit can make them sick and give them diarrhea. Once you know what kind of tortoise you have, you will be able to determine what diet is best.

In the wild, tortoises do not get the fancy foods that we feed them, and they don't eat every day. Feeding that is too regular can cause what is called a pyramided shell – bumpy and unattractive. (Pyramiding can also occur from lack of real sunlight.) It is considered a health risk for the tortoise because it indicates a loss of calcium in the shell and leads to metabolic bone disease, which has long-term negative effects on the health of tortoises. Their bones get soft and the shell can break off. So, to prevent pyramiding, we recommend feeding every other day or every third day. This will make for a slightly hungry, but healthier, tortoise!

Feed your tortoise once a day in the morning. Always make sure the food is fresh; feeding him spoiled food may give him maggots and internal worms. Place the food on newspaper so that the leftovers can be tossed easily and so that your tortoise will not eat dirt or sand, which can cause a buildup of sand in the intestines and can result in death.

We only feed our tortoises turnip greens, dandelion greens (from your garden or the store), and dark romaine lettuce. They also get corn on the cob as a treat and, once a month, they get watermelon.

As for supplements, if your tortoise or turtle has a good diet, a once-a-week dusting with calcium powder should be sufficient. We recommend mineral supplements with some calcium once a week, as opposed to just calcium. The easiest one to get the tortoise to accept is Zoo Med's Reptivite. You can also throw out cuttlebones (also used for birds) for your tortoise to munch on, but make sure that you take off all the sharp backing, as it can perforate the stomach if the tortoise eats sharp pieces.

When in doubt, peruse some websites. Good ones include www.tortoise.com (ours), www.turtlehomes.org and www.tortoisetrust.org. If you have any questions about what to feed your turtle or tortoise, feel free to send them to me at info@tortoise.com.

Susan Tellem is a co-founder of American Tortoise Rescue (www.tortoise.com), a non-profit organization that rescues, rehabilitates, adopts, and protects all species of tortoise and turtle.