

Greek tortoise

Testudo graeca

🇫🇷 Tortue grecque · 🇩🇪 Maurische Landschildkröte



REGULATIONS

CITES Appendix II

Keep/trade with proof of origin; CITES permits for import/export. OPAn: outdoor pen/UVB, managed hibernation; microchip marking recommended depending on size. Release prohibited.



LIFESPAN

50-100 years



ADULT WEIGHT

0.5-3 kg



ADULT SIZE

15-30 cm



LIFESTYLE

Mediterranean arid habitats, diurnal, terrestrial



BODY TEMPERATURE

Ectothermic / poikilothermic



SEXUAL MATURITY

7-11 years



INCUBATION

60-70 days



LITTER / CLUTCH SIZE

4-5 eggs



Habitat & environment



Type — Natural outdoor enclosure all warm season (mid-April to mid-October depending on climate). Terrarium only for juveniles, convalescence or pre-/post-brumation. South-facing, perfect drainage.



Substrate — Outdoors: garden soil/sparse turf + slate slabs for basking; small leaf-litter spots for digging. Indoors: kitchen paper, newspaper or Sandmat Exoterra®. Avoid sand and fine soil indoors (intestinal impaction).



Exercise — Large outdoor grazing area for browsing, scratching, sun-basking and hiding. The Greek tortoise is very active and easily covers several tens of metres per day.



Equipment

- Sturdy fence (concrete, treated wood or stone), ≥ 30 cm high, buried 20-30 cm against escape and digging predators
- Rounded corners (tortoises climb in corners)
- Covered shelter (hutch, cold frame) for rain and cold
- Sunny basking zone with slate slabs/stones
- Shaded areas under shrubs (summer thermal refuge)
- Shallow, wide water dish (5-8 cm), rough rim
- Edible plantings: dandelion, clover, sow thistle, hibiscus, mallow, plantain
- Cuttlebone free-choice
- Nesting box (moist sand/soil, half-sun) for females from 7-8 years
- Anti-corvid netting for juveniles



To avoid

- Fine sand / loose soil indoors (intestinal impaction)
- Hot rocks or floor heat plates (plastron burns)
- Unprotected UV lamps (burn risk)
- Glass between tortoise and UV (UVB does not pass through glass)
- Resinous wood shavings (pine, cedar) in large amounts

- Enclosure without permanent shade (summer heat stroke)
- Deep water dish (> 10 cm without ramp; drowning)
- Waterlogged ground (plastron mycoses)

Technical parameters

 Hot spot	30–35 °C Basking spot under the lamp; temperature measured at the basking surface.
 Cool spot	18–25 °C Cool and night zone; tolerates down to 15 °C at night outside brumation.
 Humidity	40–60 % Rather dry (semi-desert origin); juveniles 50–60 % to prevent pyramiding. Avoid > 70 % (plastron fungi).

Lighting

 **Photoperiod** — 10–12 h/day during activity; gradually shortened pre-brumation (8 → 6 h over 2–3 weeks). Outdoors the natural photoperiod is sufficient.

 **UVB need** — Vital indoors (vitamin D3 synthesis, calcium absorption); natural outdoors (>20 °C, sunny)

 **Lamp type** — Metal-halide lamps with external ballast (UVB + heat combined) or T5 HO 12 % tube with separate heat spot

 **Recommended brands** — X-Reptile · Reptile Expert · Solar Raptor · Arcadia

 **Replacement** — Yearly (metal-halide) — standard UV tubes every 6 months (UVB depletes before visible light)

 **Basking** — South-facing slate slab (outdoors) or metal-halide lamp at 30–40 cm distance (indoors). 30–35 °C at the shell surface.

 **UVB does not pass through glass or plexiglass. Place the lamp inside the terrarium, under a protective grille.**

 Metal halide lamps are the gold standard for UV: powerful UVB spectrum, far stronger than fluorescent tubes or compact bulbs, optimising vitamin D synthesis and calcium absorption. They lower the risk of metabolic bone disease; intense visible light and even heat drive activity.

Environmental hazards & toxins

Plants  Lily ·  Oleander ·  Yew ·  Lily of the valley ·  Foxglove ·  Rhododendron / azalea ·  Kalanchoe ·  Lantana ·  Rhubarb leaves ·  Cherry laurel & Prunus species ·  Datura & deadly nightshade ·  Hemlock ·  Hydrangea ·  Red maple (wilted leaves)

Chemicals  Slug bait (metaldehyde) ·  Herbicides & chemical fertilisers ·  Household insecticides ·  Rodenticides ·  Salt & salty water

Behaviour

Ectothermic, poikilothermic reptile. Solitary in the wild; in captivity tolerates conspecifics in a large enclosure. Main behaviour: sun-basking thermoregulation, browsing and walking, hiding during midday heat, foraging substrate. More active and thermophilic than Hermann's tortoise.

 **Social life** — Solitary leaning; a male/female pair exposes the female to constant harassment (exhaustion, shell wounds). Prefer 1 male / 2–3 females or female-only groups. Separate males (territorial fights). Never cohabit with other tortoise species (Mycoplasma agassizii and herpesvirus transmission).

 **Activity cycle** — Diurnal. Peak activity mid-morning (basking) then grazing; midday siesta in shade; second peak in the afternoon. At night, retreat to shelter or shallow burrowing.

 **Sleep & rest** — No prolonged uninterrupted sleep in active season; retreats to shelter at night. The winter rest is shorter and milder than in Hermann's tortoise (brumation 6–10 weeks, 8–12 °C) — see Hibernation section.

Enrichment

- Grazing area planted with edible varieties to forage
- Leaf-litter / straw piles to bury in
- Stumps and stones to climb (safely)
- Weekly lukewarm bath (28–30 °C)
- Scattered food distribution to encourage walking

Foraging — Techniques

- Plant dandelion, clover, plantain and hibiscus in the enclosure (spontaneous grazing)
- Scatter harvested greens in several spots rather than in a pile

Foraging

Natural grazing behaviour: the tortoise walks, browses, scratches the ground and explores. Food scattered in the planted enclosure is the ideal enrichment — far more relevant than a heap in a dish. Promotes physical activity, sun exposure and digestive health.

 **Time in the wild** — Several hours per day grazing and exploring (in active season)

- Hide favourite fruit under flat stones
- Vary weekly: shift the distribution zones
- Lukewarm bath + drinking: the animal also seeks its water

Nutrition

Strict herbivore: 90 % varied fibrous greens (wild herbs, flowers, leaves), max 10 % fruit. Favour a high Ca/P ratio (≥ 2). Natural grazing in a planted enclosure is the ideal base. No animal protein.

Daily base · 90 %

-  **Dandelion** Ca/P 5.2 Vit A
Entier (feuilles + fleurs); Ca/P ~5,2; vit. A++
-  **Houseleek** Ca/P 3
Joubarbe; Ca/P ~21 (excellent)
-  **Clover** Ca/P 5
Trèfle; Ca/P ~6,6
-  **Alfalfa** Ca/P 5.5
Luzerne; Ca/P ~6,1 — à modérer (protéines)
-  **Plantain** Ca/P 3
Ca/P ~3,4
-  **Common Sowthistle** Ca/P 3
Laiteron; Ca/P ~3
-  **Nipplewort** Ca/P 3
Lampasane

-  **Daisy** Ca/P 2
Pâquerette
-  **Watercress** Ca/P 3.5 Vit A
Très riche en vitamine A
-  **Turnip Greens** Ca/P 4.5 Vit A
Fanes de navet; Ca/P ~4,5
-  **Kale** Ca/P 2.4 Vit A
Chou vert; Ca/P ~2,4 + vit. A
-  **Bok Choy** Ca/P 3.5
Chou chinois; Ca/P ~3,5
-  **Arugula** Ca/P 4 Vit A
Roquette; Ca/P ~4,6
-  **Endive** Ca/P 1.8 Vit A
Riche en vit. A

-  **Escarole** Ca/P 2.3 Vit A
-  **Curly Endive** Ca/P 2.5 Vit A
Frisée
-  **Romaine Lettuce** Ca/P 2 Vit A
Ca/P ~2; vit. A++
-  **Lamb's Lettuce** Ca/P 2.5 Vit A
Mâche; bonne source vit. A
-  **Parsley** Ca/P 3.3
En petite quantité (oxalates)
-  **Carrot Greens** Ca/P 3.5
Fanes de carotte; Ca/P ~3,5

+ 11 more ideas at nacvet.ch

Vegetables & greens

Supplemental plants and leaves to vary the grazing base.

-  **Bell Pepper** Ca/P 0.6
Petit complément, peu sucré
-  **Green Bean** Ca/P 0.9
Modéré
-  **Swiss Chard** Ca/P 2.5 Vit A
Blettes; à varier (oxalates)
-  **Rutabaga** Ca/P 3.2
Feuilles; Ca/P ~3,2

Pellets & supplements

Recommended brands : Mazuri Tortoise LS · Pre-Alpin Testudo · ZooMed Natural Grassland Tortoise

Tortoise herbivore pellets as occasional supplement, always rehydrated (prevents water deficit and improves chewing). Not as the staple.

-  **Pellet**
Réhydraté 5–10 min avant distribution

★ Treats (occasional) · 10 %

Fruit and sweeter plants in very small amounts (max 10 % of the diet). Favour vitamin-A-rich sources.

-  **Apricot** Ca/P 0.8 Vit A
Riche en vit. A
-  **Melon** Ca/P 0.6 Vit A
Riche en vit. A
-  **Papaya** Ca/P 0.8
Riche en vit. A; effet légèrement laxatif
-  **Mango** Ca/P 0.5
Riche en vit. A
-  **Watermelon** Ca/P 0.6
Hydratant
-  **Prickly Pear** Ca/P 2.3
Figue de barbarie; excellent Ca/P
-  **Fig** Ca/P 2.1
Fraîche; Ca/P ~2,1
-  **Dried Fig** Ca/P 1.8
Figue sèche; Ca/P ~1,8
-  **Orange** Ca/P 1.8
Épluchée; modéré
-  **Mandarin / Clementine** Ca/P 1.2
Clémentine; modéré
-  **Guava** Ca/P 1.1
Source vit. C
-  **Kiwi** Ca/P 0.6
Très occasionnel
-  **Blackberry** Ca/P 0.9
Mûre de culture
-  **Kumquat** Ca/P 0.9
Petit, occasionnel
-  **Roselle** Ca/P 1.2
Fleur d'hibiscus; appréciée

Hydration

Fresh water permanently in a wide, shallow dish, changed once daily. Lukewarm baths (28–30 °C, 15–20 min) weekly in active season, daily pre-/post-brumation. Tortoises drink mostly while bathing and from juicy plants.

Vitamin A

Essential for mucous membranes, skin, shedding and vision. Deficiency: puffy eyes, dysecdysis, respiratory/eye infections, poor shell quality. Covered by rich greens: dandelion (≈ 397,000 IU/kg DM), watercress (≈ 422,000), romaine (≈ 274,000), spinach (≈ 301,000), endive, turnip greens, kale, mango, papaya, apricot, melon.

FREQUENCY

- Daily in active season (April to October), portion eaten within 15–20 min
- 1–2 fasting days/week tolerated in adults (prevents obesity and pyramiding)
- Gradual fasting from September before brumation
- Calcium and cuttlebone permanently free-choice
- Fresh water permanently available

CALCIUM/PHOSPHORUS RATIO (CA/P)

Key indicator of a food's mineral balance, especially in reptiles: a calcium-favoured ratio supports bone and shell strength. Targets: ≥ 2 = balanced · $1-2$ = in moderation · < 1 = avoid (encourages metabolic bone disease). For insects, a calcium powder at feeding time offsets an unfavourable ratio.

TO AVOID

Toxic, severely unbalanced foods (poor Ca/P, sugar/starch-rich) or unsuitable for the strict herbivore. Animal protein is forbidden (gout, MBD, liver damage).

 **Avocado**
Persine — cardiotoxique

 **Rhubarb**
Acide oxalique

 **Eggplant**
Solanine

 **Daffodil**
Toxique

 **Azalea**
Grayanotoxines

 **Tulip**
Tuliposides

 **Firefly**
Mortel

 **Mushroom**
Ca/P 0,06

 **Corn**
Ca/P 0,1; amidon trop élevé

 **Brussels Sprouts**
Ca/P 0,2; goitre

 **Banana**
Trop sucré; Ca/P 0,3

 **Tomato**
Acidité + Ca/P 0,4

 **Lettuce**
Iceberg/ronde : trop d'eau, peu nutritive

 **Peach**
Trop sucré

 **Apple**
Trop sucré

 **Cucumber**
Concombre : trop d'eau, Ca/P 0,5

 **Cauliflower**
Goitre

 **Carrot**
Trop sucré; Ca/P 0,6

 **Grape**
Trop sucré

 **Strawberry**
Trop sucré

 **Raspberry**
À limiter

 **Chicken**
Pas de protéine animale

 **Fatty meat**
Pas de protéine animale

 **Dairy product**
Inadapté

 **Bread**
Inadapté

 **Pasta**
Inadapté

Health & prevention

Preventive medicine

Annual clinical exam (shell, nostrils, eyes, oral cavity, plastron, body condition), monthly weighing (trend curve), yearly faecal exam before brumation, microchip from >10 cm shell length, quarantine ≥ 3 months for any new specimen (Mycoplasma agassizii and herpesvirus screening in at-risk animals). Annual UVB lamp replacement indoors. Wild-caught North African specimens are particularly prone to mycoplasmosis: PCR screening advised.

Vaccination

No routine vaccinations in the Greek tortoise.

Surgery & neutering

WARNING SIGNS

- Soft or deformed shell (MBD)
- Poor shedding, dry/cracked skin
- Nasal or eye discharge, open-mouth breathing (RNS)
- Apathy, feeding refusal > 5–7 days in active season
- Weight loss > 10 % (especially post-brumation)
- Distended abdomen, penguin-gait in females (dystocia)
- Plastron with yellow/brown stains (fungus, ulcer)
- Blood in urine or stools
- Repeated waking during brumation (warning sign)

Common procedures: ovariectomy for dystocia, shell wound care (fractures, predator injuries), cloacal/penile prolapse correction, abscess removal (notably aural abscesses), bladder stone removal (urates), shell repair with epoxy resin.

Common conditions

Metabolic bone disease (MBD)

SYMPTOMS Soft/deformed shell (pyramiding), soft beak, slow growth, spontaneous fractures, limb weakness

CAUSE Calcium and/or UVB deficiency, excess fruit, unbalanced Ca/P, inadequate humidity in juveniles

PREVENTION UVB 10–12 % replaced yearly, free-choice calcium, high-Ca/P greens, age-appropriate humidity

Mycoplasmosis / Runny nose syndrome (RNS)

SYMPTOMS Serous then mucopurulent nasal discharge, wheezing, appetite loss, conjunctivitis, often chronic

CAUSE *Mycoplasma agassizii* or *Mycoplasma testudineum* (very common in *T. graeca*, especially North African specimens), chelonid herpesviruses, captivity stress, environment too cool/damp

PREVENTION Quarantine ≥ 3 months and *Mycoplasma*/herpes PCR for any new arrival, no mixing of tortoise species, strict hygiene, warm and dry environment

Dystocia / egg retention

SYMPTOMS Anorexic female, > 1 week digging activity without laying, distended abdomen, penguin-gait

CAUSE No suitable nesting site, hypocalcaemia, oversized eggs, dehydration, stress

PREVENTION Nesting box with moist sand/soil accessible all season, adequate calcium, hydration, yearly female check-up

Shell ulcers / mycosis

SYMPTOMS White/yellow/brown spots on plastron or carapace, progressive erosion, oozing, foul smell

CAUSE Substrate too damp or soiled, untreated wounds, parasitism (flies/maggots)

PREVENTION Dry, clean substrate (perfect drainage), regular cleaning, weekly shell check

If any of these symptoms appear, prompt veterinary care is essential.

Contact an exotic-pet vet as soon as possible.

Intestinal parasitism (pinworms, roundworms, flagellates)

SYMPTOMS Soft stools or diarrhoea, weight loss, growth delay, visible parasites in droppings

CAUSE Faecal re-infestation, poor hygiene, stress

PREVENTION Annual faecal exam (especially before brumation), targeted deworming, remove droppings regularly

Bladder stones (urates)

SYMPTOMS Anorexia, walking backwards, groaning, refusing baths, pasty urates

CAUSE Chronic dehydration, excess protein, diet too dry

PREVENTION Weekly baths, hydrated greens, no animal protein, water always available

Shell pyramiding

SYMPTOMS Dorsal scutes permanently raised in cones (irreversible deformation)

CAUSE Growth too fast, too low humidity in juveniles, excess protein, lack of exercise

PREVENTION 50–60 % humidity for juveniles, very fibrous diet, daily exercise, outdoor exposure as soon as possible

Aural abscess

SYMPTOMS Firm unilateral tympanic swelling (caseous material), often painless, sometimes anorexia

CAUSE Ascending from the Eustachian tube (poor hygiene, hypovitaminosis A, cold/damp environment)

PREVENTION Correct humidity, dietary vitamin A, environmental hygiene; surgical drainage when confirmed

Hibernation

Support this phase carefully and gradually.

 **Good to know** — Short, controlled brumation (6–10 weeks at 8–12 °C) rather than deep hibernation — key difference from Hermann's tortoise. Adapt to subspecies: *T. g. ibera* (Anatolia) tolerates colder/longer; *T. g. graeca* (Morocco/Spain) prefers a shorter, milder rest. Do not brumate: juvenile < 100–150 g, sick/convalescent animal, pre-brumation weight loss, or uncontrolled humid climate. Warning signs: repeated waking, nasal discharge, loss > 1 %/month or > 6–8 % total → interrupt and warm up gradually.

 **Period** — October/November to January (6–10 weeks). Shorter and milder brumation than Hermann's tortoise.

 **Temperature** — 8–12 °C

 **Method** — Cool dry room, polystyrene-insulated box at least 30 cm high, dry substrate (leaf litter/hay/newspaper), rodent protection. Reference weighing before entry. Do not hibernate in uncontrolled outdoor pits (T°/humidity fluctuations).

 [Full 7-step plan on nacvet.ch](https://nacvet.ch)

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