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Sulcata Tortoise Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Sulcata tortoises (*Centrochelys sulcata*), also known as African spurred tortoises, are the **third-largest tortoise species in the world**. Native to the Sahel and edges of the Sahara Desert in Africa, they are highly adapted to arid, harsh climates.

Adult sulcatas typically reach **24–36 inches** in shell length and **80–150 pounds**, though exceptional individuals can exceed this. They routinely live **50–100+ years**, making them true **multi-generational** commitments. While personable and intelligent, they require significant space, specialized housing, and long-term planning.

## **Housing & Environment**

Sulcatas are **terrestrial grazers** that need extensive room to roam, dig, and bask. Indoors, even young sulcatas should have at least an **8×4 ft tortoise table**, but this becomes impractical as they grow. **Outdoor housing is strongly recommended** for adults whenever climate allows.

Outdoor pens should be **≥100 sq ft**, securely fenced, and buried at least **12–18 inches** to prevent burrowing escapes. They need dry, well-drained soil to dig burrows that help regulate temperature. Provide sturdy shelters for shade and protection from rain and predators.

**Housing Highlights:**

* **Indoor (juveniles):** ≥8×4 ft enclosure
* **Outdoor (adults):** ≥100 sq ft, secure fencing, dig-proof
* **Substrate:** Soil/sand blend ≥6–12" for digging
* **Shelters:** Dry, insulated, predator-proof
* **Enrichment:** Logs, rocks, edible plants, varied terrain
* **Cleaning:** Spot-clean daily; replace substrate as needed

## **Lighting, Heat & Humidity**

Sulcatas originate in **hot, arid environments** and need strong heat gradients and UVB exposure. Provide **12–14 hours of full-spectrum daylight** and UVB lighting indoors (T5 HO 10–12% or mercury vapor bulb).

**Basking zones** should reach **100–110°F**, with ambient daytime temperatures of **80–90°F**. Nighttime temps can drop safely to **65–75°F**, but avoid prolonged cold or damp. Indoors, use ceramic heat emitters or radiant heat panels for night heating if needed.

Humidity should be **low to moderate (40–60%)**, but juveniles benefit from an occasional humid hide or short soaks to prevent pyramiding.

**Temperature & Lighting Essentials:**

* **Basking area:** 100–110°F
* **Daytime ambient:** 80–90°F
* **Night:** 65–75°F
* **UVB lighting:** 10–12%, 12–14 hrs/day
* **Humidity:** 40–60%, with optional humid hide for juveniles

## **Water & Hydration**

Despite their desert origins, sulcatas **require regular hydration** to stay healthy. Always provide a **shallow, sturdy water dish** large enough for the tortoise to drink and soak its front limbs. Change water daily.

Soak **juveniles 2–3 times weekly** in lukewarm water for **15–20 minutes**. Adults should be offered soaks weekly, especially during hot or dry periods.

**Hydration Notes:**

* **Dish:** Heavy, tip-resistant, easy-access
* **Cleaning:** Daily rinsing and sanitation weekly
* **Soaks:** 2–3×/week (juveniles), weekly (adults)

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Sulcatas are **strict herbivores** evolved for grazing on dry, fibrous plants. Their diet should be **high-fiber, low-protein, and low-sugar**.

Feed mostly grasses, hay (like timothy or orchard), and edible weeds. Supplement with dark leafy greens. Avoid high-oxalate greens in excess and limit fruit strictly (if given at all). Calcium supplementation is essential to prevent metabolic bone disease.

**Diet Guidelines:**

* **Staple diet:** Grasses, hay (timothy, orchard)
* **Leafy greens:** Dandelion, collard, chicory, mulberry leaves
* **Edible weeds/flowers:** Plantain, hibiscus, clover
* **Avoid:** Spinach, iceberg lettuce, high-protein foods (dog/cat food), fruit (rare or none)
* **Supplements:** Calcium + D3 2–3× weekly; reptile multivitamin weekly
* **Feeding frequency:** Daily for juveniles; daily or every other day for adults

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Schedule an **initial veterinary exam** soon after acquisition and **annual checkups**. Common health issues include **respiratory infections** (especially with cold/damp housing), **shell pyramiding** (from poor diet or low UVB), **metabolic bone disease**, and **parasites**.

Watch for symptoms such as nasal discharge, wheezing, swollen eyes, shell deformities, poor appetite, or lethargy. Maintain **proper heating, lighting, diet, and hygiene** to prevent disease.

**Healthcare Reminders:**

* **Annual vet exams** recommended
* **Common issues:** Respiratory disease, pyramiding, MBD, parasites
* **Warning signs:** Lethargy, runny nose, wheezing, shell softening or bumps
* **Hygiene:** Wash hands before/after handling

## **Behavior & Handling**

Sulcatas are known for being **strong, active, and curious**. They enjoy roaming and grazing but can be destructive diggers. Adults are **very strong** and can push through or under fences if not well secured.

They can become tame and recognize caregivers, but handling should be **minimal** given their size and weight. When lifting, **support the entire body from below**.

**Behavior Tips:**

* **Temperament:** Curious, bold, strong
* **Handling:** Minimal, full-body support
* **Warning:** Powerful diggers and pushers—plan for secure fencing
* **Enrichment:** Grazing, climbing over logs/rocks, foraging

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

A well-designed enclosure supports both **mental and physical health**. Provide **varied terrain** with logs, rocks, and edible plants. Include shaded areas and sunny basking zones. Outdoor spaces should mimic natural grazing fields.

Rotate décor periodically to encourage exploration and reduce boredom.

**Enrichment Ideas:**

* Logs and rocks to climb over
* Edible plants (hibiscus, mulberry, clover)
* Secure shaded shelters
* Rotating décor for novelty
* Dig-friendly soil for natural burrows

## **Fun Facts & FAQs**

* The **third-largest tortoise** species, after the Galápagos and Aldabra giants.
* Named for **large "sulcus" (spurs) on hind legs**.
* Native to **sub-Saharan Africa’s dry Sahel region**.
* Can live **100+ years** with excellent care.
* Known for **strong digging and pushing behavior**.

### **Supplies Checklist**

* Indoor tortoise table (≥8×4 ft) for juveniles
* Outdoor pen (≥100 sq ft), secure and dig-proof
* Deep soil/sand substrate (≥6–12″)
* UVB lighting and heat lamps
* Ceramic heat emitters, thermostats, timers
* Shallow, tip-proof water dish
* Logs, rocks, edible safe plants
* Calcium + D3 and reptile multivitamin
* Grass hay (timothy/orchard)
* Fresh edible greens and weeds
* Cleaning and sanitation supplies
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

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