

Caring for Horsfield's Tortoises

Horsfield's tortoises in the UK need access to both indoor and outdoor accommodation during a typical British year (even if they hibernate for 6-8 weeks in the winter). As tortoises are ectotherms, they cannot generate their own body heat – they have to absorb it from the environment. Most tortoises require basking temperatures of at least 30°C and minimum overnight temperatures of around 15 °C – an unlikely range in Britain even in the summer. This should be taken into account when making decisions as a responsible owner as to whether any tortoise should be left outside overnight, or whether the accommodation allows access to a suitable shed, greenhouse or conservatory. In addition, concerns such as security from theft or damage by wildlife such as foxes, should be taken into account and as a general rule tortoise should be inside secure accommodation which keeps them above 15 °C overnight.

The Horsfield's enclosure should mimic the natural habitat as far as possible. In this case the Russian Steppe, or similar areas in countries of origin such as Afghanistan, China, Russia.



Landscaping, both indoor and outdoor accommodation, will require provision of slopes, mounds, a variety of surfaces such as grass, gravel, soil, sand. This is not easy to achieve if we are to try to provide tortoises with enough scope and variety to allow them to carry out their natural behaviours and ensure their good health.

The images below include ideas and examples of environments that have been designed to provide Horsfield's tortoises with variety in terms of feeding an appropriate diet which as natural as possible; allowing them to achieve their preferred optimum temperatures during the day and to allow them to show most of their natural behaviours:



A pen for a pair of Horsfields tortoises with a variety of soil and sand substrates, a bath for drinking and bathing, shelter and shade. The roof of the house is polycarbonate – very good at absorbing and retaining heat. There is mainly bare earth and gravel as this species from the Russian Steppe, does not tolerate high humidity as would be found in a grass enclosure.

Horsfield's tortoises are herbivores which need high fibre, high calcium foods. They do not eat fruit as this is too acidic and can upset their digestive processes by damaging the gut flora which are needed to help digest the plant material. The best diet for them is garden weeds, such as Sow Thistle, deadnettle, dandelion, goose-grass, garlic mustard, nipplewort, oxtongue, cat's ear, couch grass, bindweed, hawkbit and hawk-beard, mallow, plantain (see below).

Landscaping for shade and basking for Horsfield's tortoises



Hot, dry pen with shade and burrowing places – Horsfield's tortoises aestivate in the summer if the weather gets too hot. Pipes can provide hiding places.



Some examples of suitable plants for shade and feeding:

Sow Thistle

Nipplewort

Cat's Ear

Goosegrass



Deadnettle

Mixed weeds

Plantain



Some example habitat which provides warm areas outdoors using greenhouse and cold-frame type accommodation:



Railway sleepers make good solid boundaries. Limestone/chalk provides good calcium sources.

Varied substrates, cover and a cold-frame for warmth. Lavatera makes a good food source and provides shade. Greenhouses provide good variation in habitat and allow additional heat to be provided with lamps and heaters:

Female Horsfield's laying

