

## YOUR TORTOISE & HIBERNATION

Which species are we talking about?

The Mediterranean tortoises make up the vast majority of tortoises kept as pets in the U.K.

If you've got a tortoise and aren't sure what species it is, ask us before making hibernation plans. A long winter sleep may not be what your species does in the wild!

The four Mediterranean species are:

- Spur-thighed *Testudo graeca*
- Hermann's *Testudo hermanni*
- Marginated *Testudo marginata*
- Horsefield's *Testudo horsefieldi*

### Why do tortoises hibernate?

Like all reptiles, tortoises control their body temperature by sitting in the sun to warm up and moving to the shade to cool down. If the weather doesn't enable them to warm to within their "preferred optimum temperature range" (POTR) then they'll be inactive and won't feed.

Their POTR is the range within which they can move about, feed, digest their food and behave normally.

Tortoises hibernate when they have no option, so Mediterranean species hibernate when where they live is too cold to support tortoise activity.

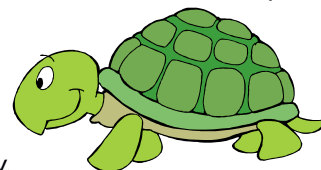
### In the wild

In places such as Greece, Turkey or North Africa, tortoises wouldn't hibernate for half the year! As autumn progresses and the weather gets colder, tortoises eat less and less, finally burying themselves in the soil. During warm snaps they may emerge again, then bury themselves again if the cold returns.



### General rules

- Only hibernate a tortoise that is healthy.
- If in any doubt, ask your tortoise vet before hibernating your tortoise.
- Tortoises should hibernate with an empty gut as far as possible. So don't give food for two to three weeks beforehand (adult tortoise – less for young ones) and give your tortoise every opportunity to empty its bowels.
- Encourage your tortoise to empty its bowel and bladder by giving a shallow bath in warm water - the water should come up to the top of the plastron (the bottom part of the shell). This also ensures that your tortoise goes into hibernation as fully hydrated as possible.
- Gradually reduce the temperature to make sure your tortoise is not too active in the last few weeks, and so doesn't use up too



much energy.

### Where & how to hibernate

A Mediterranean tortoise should hibernate between 5 and 8 deg C –

- any warmer and it will be too active, lose weight and become dehydrated;
- any cooler and you risk frost damage – so you'll need a maximum/minimum thermometer to keep a check on the temperature!

Use a place/container that is frost, rat and fox proof.

- [**Remember:** rats and foxes get very hungry and very determined during the winter].

Use leafmould, potting compost, hay or shredded paper.

- [**Remember:** in the wild tortoises hibernate in damp soil - the drier the environment the faster your tortoise will lose fluid and risk dehydration].

One of the best ways of hibernating especially smaller tortoises is in a fridge – either a beer fridge of their own or in the household fridge.

### During hibernation

During hibernation you need to

- monitor the temperature ( make sure it stays between 5 and 8 degrees Celsius)
- Weigh your tortoise regularly; a healthy tortoise loses less than 1% of its bodyweight per month during hibernation.

### Waking up again

Give your tortoise as long as you and your vet have decided is appropriate; **don't** just wait for it to wake up of its own accord!

Bring it into the house and make sure it's warmed up to within its POTR.

- You could use a tortoise table or vivarium with proper heating equipment,
- or a heat lamp –
- though if your house is quite warm and your tortoise a healthy adult, he or she will probably do fine in a pen on the kitchen floor.

Give your tortoise a bath in the same way you did before it went to sleep.

Expect your tortoise to drink within 2 days and eat within 5 days of waking.

Some start eating immediately.

**If your tortoise doesn't eat within a week of waking or being woken, it should be checked by your vet.**



### The older tortoise

Older tortoises with failing health may need to be kept awake for most or all of winter. Some are best living in a vivarium or tortoise table, but others adapt well to trundling round part of the house, eating enough to maintain their bodyweight without being annoyingly active when you're cooking Christmas dinner!

### The young tortoise

Young tortoises hibernate in the wild but some don't survive it.

We recommend a short hibernation for all young tortoises.

- This is because a common problem we see is your tortoise growing too fast, especially if it is eating all the year round, and as a result developing shell deformities.

We recommend that all young tortoises are checked by your vet towards the end of summer so that plans can be made for over-wintering - either awake or with suitable hibernation.

We may recommend just a short rest period to slow their growth rate for a while over winter.

### The ill or injured tortoise

Sick and injured tortoises are best kept awake during the winter.

Your vet will advise about suitable accommodation and management to suit your particular tortoise.

### For more advice

If you're wondering:

- whether your tortoise should hibernate,
- how long it should hibernate for,
- how to look after your tortoise during the autumn and spring,
- whether your tortoise might not be as healthy as you hoped – because he/she is getting older, then phone us to arrange for our vet to check your tortoise and discuss its management during the autumn, the winter and into the spring.

A.J.Pearson BA VetMB MRCVS

# PET SUBJECTS



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