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Care of Aquatic Turtles

Things to Know

Before purchasing or adopting an aquatic turtle, you need to know what will be required to keep them! I am a big fan of pet turtles, but without question they are among the most labor intensive reptiles to care for. They are extremely messy and their aquariums **MUST** be cleaned often. If the work of keeping a turtle isn't offset by the enjoyment you would get from one, please avoid the impulse buy! You should plan to have a large (40 gallons or larger) aquarium, in which you will change the water weekly. Turtles live a very long time! Expect 20 years or much longer and factor this in when deciding if they are the choice for you.

Identify Your Species Before Buying

You will often see cute little green turtles at flea markets, T-shirt shops at the beach, and on Indian reservations. They have a low price tag, usually five to ten dollars. These are baby red-eared sliders, one of the larger aquatic turtles. Many folks have come through my store with these having been told that either they would stay tiny, or would grow only to the size of their tank. Neither of these statements is true. Expect the turtle to grow to about a foot in length if it is a female; if you get a male, it will grow only to 7 inches or so. Other species such as musk and mud turtles are a bit smaller and less messy.

Aquatic Turtle Setups

Most people either use a canister filter or an oversized Aqua-Clear filter on their turtle tanks. Avoid cartridge filters for turtles, those expensive filter cartridges will have to be replaced too often. I personally use Aqua Clear filters and I only use the foam pad, which must be rinsed weekly. A heater set to keep the water around 78-80 is needed; try to find one either made of plastic or with a plastic cage around it so that the glass does not break. In addition to water heat, a basking light is needed. Place this directly over the area where your turtle crawls out to bask. The basking light is typically only turned on during the day. Turtle docks are commercially made and look nice, but anything that floats with the weight of the turtle will suffice as long as it is easily accessed from the water. Typically, I set aquatic turtles up with an aquarium 75% full for yearlings and older turtles; tiny babies do best in very shallow water. As with all reptiles, proper temperatures are critical for turtles. If they experience a cold spell, they will usually go off feed and may develop respiratory problems. Gravel or substrate is not needed, though it can make the aquarium look more natural. If you opt to use it, vacuum it weekly with your water changes. Do **NOT** start siphons for a turtle tank with your mouth! While the salmonella scare is likely overhyped, getting a mouthful of water with turtle feces is potentially dangerous. Start all siphons manually (using gravity) or with a unit that attaches to a sink.

Feeding

A varied diet is optimal, but different species have different requirements. Most sliders are more carnivorous as babies and eat more vegetation as they mature. Avoid feeder goldfish in all cases for all reptiles. Goldfish have been implicated in copper poisoning and *Thiaminase* toxicity in both fish and reptiles. Bait minnows are much safer if you must feed your turtle live fish. As with any animal that will be under your care, it is your responsibility to research the dietary needs for the species you have.

Legal Issues and Health Concerns

It is a violation of federal law to sell any aquatic turtle with a shell length less than four inches. Many stores tried to get around this by selling a habitat and giving the turtle away for free. I have heard that the law has now been changed to possession (rather than sale), but have not found the legal documentation at the time of this writing. Baby turtles were outlawed in the mid 1970's after several implications of salmonella when at least two children died. The reasoning for the four inch shell length is that a child would be less likely to stick a larger turtle in their mouth. Remember that bacteria can just as easily be spread by handling the animal or even having your hand in the water, then hand to mouth contact. Always wash your hands after handling any animal, and take care that children do as well. Also, turtles should really be treated almost like fish; they are more of a specimen than a "pet." Keep handling to a minimum, both for the turtle's stress levels and for sanitary reasons.

Aquatic turtles range from tiny African dwarf mud turtles to alligator snappers weighing over 200 pounds. The diets, habitats, and care will vary for each so do your homework! All turtles need warm clean water, though. Remember, they have to drink what they are swimming in; don't let it get putrid. In an adequate sized, clean aquarium, turtles make charming captive specimens. Never release any turtle into the wild. The problems they can bring to an ecosystem are too many to mention, and long term captives cannot adapt to hunting and surviving in the wild. If you have an unwanted turtle, please call the shop and I will try to rehome it. Red eared sliders are often difficult to place but almost any other type can quickly find a caring owner. Charlie Green is the Asheville turtle rescue man, his cell number is 828-779-2249. The Southern Appalachian Herpetological Society often has members who will take in rescue reptiles of all kinds.

- Chip Bridges