

BOX TURTLE CARE GUIDE

Terrapene spp.

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Box turtles are the hinge-shelled homebodies of the reptile world — close the door, seal up like a lunchbox, and wait you out. With a lifespan of 25–40+ years (some centenarians on record), this is a pet that may outlast your mortgage. They're quiet, personable, and can be taught to come running for a strawberry — which, no, is not the same as being easy.

📖 HOUSING & ENCLOSURE

- As large an enclosure as possible with high sides — box turtles are surprisingly determined escape artists for something shaped like a rock.
- Hatchlings can start in a 20-gallon aquarium, but budget for a 40-gallon or larger as an adult — they will spend real time trying to walk through the glass.
- Custom enclosures work well: 4×4 ft, 12 in high comfortably houses two compatible turtles. Rubbermaid-style bins (50-gal) or a concrete mixing tub are cheap, easy-clean alternatives.
- Outdoor housing needs a small pond for wading, an enclosed shelter, and full predator- and dig-proofing — a determined raccoon is not a hypothetical.

Substrate

Safe substrate: Reptile carpet or newspaper with timothy hay on top is a great option

Other choices include alfalfa pellets, cypress mulch or coconut husk

Never use: Sand, aquarium/pea gravel, corncob, walnut shell, artificial grass, or cedar/wood chips

- Never give a box turtle full house freedom — they vanish behind furniture with alarming efficiency and don't announce themselves.

Accessories

Rocks, driftwood, and pesticide-free plants add enrichment - rotate accessories weekly so the turtle has something new to investigate.

Provide two or more hide boxes (one warm side, one cool side) - cork bark, terracotta halves, or PVC pipes all work, sized so the turtle can turn around inside.

“Humid hide” - this can contain moist sphagnum moist (replace weekly) or combine with their need to dig by providing clean digging soil. Soil should be moist enough to clump together but not enough that excess water drains out when squeezed.

Water should be provided at all times. Use a bowl that is no deeper than 1/3 the turtle's height and is easy to wade in and out of. It will absolutely be used as a toilet — plan on daily changes.

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🔍 TEMPERATURE, HUMIDITY & LIGHTING

Zone	Temperature
Daytime ambient	74–80°F (23–27°C)
Basking area	82–90°F (28–32°C)
Nighttime	Drops to ≈70°F (21°C)

- Heat sources (basking bulb, under-tank heater, heat cable/tape) need a thermostat and must live outside the enclosure — unguarded heat elements cause burns, no exceptions.
- Humidity: 40–50% (Ornates run toward the lower end); a moist dig box gives the turtle a self-serve ~70% humidity zone whenever it wants one.
- Full-spectrum UVB lighting: 12–14 hours daily, 12–24 in from the turtle. We recommend Arcardia or Zoomed bulbs. Make sure to follow the manufacturer’s recommendations on care and replacement.. Most bulbs need to be replaced every 6–12 months regardless of whether it “still works.”
- No lighting at night — and skip the colored bulbs; box turtles see color and don't need mood lighting.
- Monitor temperature and humidity with an actual thermometer/hygrometer and keep a record — “feels about right” is not a data point.

🔍 DIET & FEEDING

Diet Component	Target Share
Animal protein (Earthworms, mealworms, black soldier fly larvae, hornworms, crickets, slugs, and snails. Gel mixes (Repashy Superfoods) can also be used)	≈50%
Vegetables & leafy greens (Dark leafy greens, dandelions, carrots, squashes, pumpkin, bell peppers, edible mushrooms, etc)	≈40%
Fruit (apples, strawberries, tomatoes, raspberries, blueberries)	≈10%

- Feed juveniles daily, adults every other day — in the early morning or late evening, when turtles are actually motivated.
- Box turtles hunt by sight, smell, and movement — misting the salad and offering live prey (earthworms, slugs, snails) stimulates a proper feeding response.
- They're drawn to red, orange, and yellow foods and flowers — nasturtiums, hibiscus, sweet potato, cantaloupe, strawberries, and blueberries are all fair game.
- Avoid feeding large amounts of broccoli, spinach, or kale — they can contribute to GI and urinary issues, including stones.
- Never feed dog or cat food — the protein levels are built for a different animal entirely and can wreck a turtle's kidneys.
- Finely chop or puree salads for picky eaters — training a fussy box turtle is a patience exercise, not a diet substitute.

🔍 SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement	Frequency
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Calcium supplement	2–3 times per week
Reptile multivitamin	Once per week

📖 ROUTINE VETERINARY CARE & BRUMATION

- Annual exams with blood work and a stool check are recommended — turtles are exceptional at hiding illness, so don't wait for obvious symptoms.
- Watch for: decreased appetite or activity, discharge from eyes/nose, eye swelling, weight loss, sunken eyes, an overgrown beak or nails, or flaky skin — any of these means a vet visit, not a wait-and-see.
- **Dogs are the single most common household hazard** for box turtles — a bite can puncture the shell and become life-threatening fast. Any dog bite is an emergency vet visit.
- Brumation (a turtle's version of hibernation) is optional, not required for good health, and done wrong it can seriously harm your turtle. Get a pre-brumation exam from a reptile vet, and record weight every two weeks throughout — more than a 10% body-weight loss means stop and call your vet.

📖 IS YOUR TURTLE A MALE OR FEMALE?

- Males tend to be larger, more colorful, with thicker, longer tails and a concave plastron (bottom shell); in some subspecies, males have bright red irises.
- Females have a vent set closer to the body, a flatter plastron, and light brown or dull red irises. Bred females may lay eggs — fertile or not — so keep an egg-laying area on standby just in case.

📖 VITAL STATISTICS

Statistic	Value
Body length	5–6.5 in (11–15 cm)
Body weight	200–600 g
Age of sexual maturity	Females 5–7 yrs; Males 4–6 yrs
Average life span	~40–50 years (reports of 100+ not unheard of)

⚠️ IMPORTANT ZOONOTIC INFORMATION

Most, if not all, reptiles — including box turtles — carry *Salmonella* bacteria and shed it intermittently in their feces, even when they look perfectly healthy. Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling your turtle or anything from its enclosure, and keep enclosure cleaning away from food-prep areas. Box turtles are not recommended for very young children or individuals with compromised immune systems — careful supervised observation is a better fit than hands-on handling.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.
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