

Habitat Setup Checklist

Everything that needs to be in place BEFORE a tortoise moves in. Work top to bottom — the order matters.

Enclosure

- ☐ Open-top tortoise table or custom enclosure (min. 4×8 ft for an adult)
No glass aquariums — they trap stale air and prevent a real temperature gradient.
- ☐ Solid, opaque walls at least 12" tall
Tortoises don't understand transparent walls and will rub their shells raw.
- ☐ Secure lid only if cats, dogs, or kids are in the room
Otherwise keep it open for airflow and UVB penetration.

Substrate

- ☐ Deep, diggable substrate — 4 to 6 inches
Cypress mulch, coco coir, organic topsoil + play sand (50/50). Forest species like it damp; grassland species drier.
- ☐ Never use calcium sand, walnut shell, or cedar/pine shavings
All three cause impaction or respiratory irritation.

Lighting

- ☐ UVB tube — T5 HO 10.0 or 12% (Arcadia or Zoo Med ReptiSun)
Mounted 12–15" above the basking spot. No mesh between bulb and tortoise.
- ☐ Basking bulb — halogen flood, 50–100W as needed
Aim for 90–95°F surface temp on the basking platform.
- ☐ 12-hour timer on both lights
Consistent day/night cycle. Adjust seasonally if you want.
- ☐ Replace UVB tube every 12 months
Mark the date on the bulb with a Sharpie.

Temperature gradient

- ☐ Basking spot 90–95°F (check with a temp gun)
Hot end of the enclosure only — never uniform heat.
- ☐ Cool side 72–78°F
Place the humid hide on this side.
- ☐ Nighttime drop to 65–72°F
Supplemental ceramic heat emitter only if the room drops below 65°F.
- ☐ Digital thermometer on BOTH sides
Analog dial thermometers are inaccurate — don't use them.

Humidity

- ☐ Digital hygrometer mounted at tortoise height
Forest species (yellow-foot, red-foot) 70–90%. Grassland species (Russian, Greek, Hermann's) 40–60%.
- ☐ Humid hide stuffed with damp sphagnum moss
On the cool side. Re-wet weekly.
- ☐ Daily light misting of substrate if needed
Goal is damp, not waterlogged.

Water & food

- ☐ Shallow, heavy water dish — tortoise can sit in it without tipping
Terracotta plant saucers work well. Sink it flush with the substrate.
- ☐ Flat slate or tile feeding stone
Keeps food off substrate and helps file the beak.
- ☐ Cuttlebone available at all times
Free-choice calcium between meals.

Furnishings & enrichment

- ☐ At least one hide on each side (warm + humid cool hide)
Tortoises need cover to feel safe.
- ☐ Live edible plants where possible
Hibiscus, spider plant, dandelion. Pothos is fine for cover but not for eating.
- ☐ Broken sight lines — logs, cork bark, rocks
A flat empty enclosure is a stressful enclosure.
- ☐ Outdoor pen for supervised grazing when weather allows
Predator-proof from above (hawks) and below (digging). Real sunlight beats any bulb.

Before you bring the tortoise home

- ☐ Run the enclosure empty for 48 hours
Confirm temps and humidity hold steady across a full day/night cycle.
- ☐ Locate a reptile-experienced vet (ARAV directory)
Save the phone number on your phone before day one.
- ☐ Quarantine new tortoises 90 days from any existing reptiles
Separate room, separate tools, wash hands between.
- ☐ Read the species-specific care sheet one more time
Reptifiles and The Tortoise Table are the references we trust.

Tip: print this checklist and clip it near the enclosure. Re-check anything marked monthly on the first of the month.