Leopard Tortoise Care Guide

15-page illustrated guide | Habitat, heat, UVB, grass diet, hydration and health



A leopard tortoise needs broad grazing space, warmth, UVB, safe hydration, a high-fiber diet, and a warm shelter for every season.

A practical, species-specific overview for responsible ownership in the United States. Use this guide alongside an experienced reptile veterinarian and current local rules.

01 | Species, size and lifespan

The leopard tortoise (Stigmochelys pardalis) is a large African grazing tortoise recognized by its yellow and dark patterned shell. Adults commonly reach about 16-18 inches, with larger individuals possible, and may live 50-80+ years.

It needs far more space than a small pet tortoise, a high-fiber grass diet, bright light, UVB, basking heat, clean water, and a warm dry shelter. Adults are challenging to house indoors in many climates.

- Leopard tortoises do not hibernate. Do not intentionally cool or brumate them.
- Do not confuse this species with a leopard gecko or leopard tortoise beetle.

A young leopard tortoise grows into a large, long-lived animal. Plan housing and climate control for its adult size.

02 | Sourcing, records and first veterinary visit

Ask for captive-bred or rescue records, hatch date, parent or locality details, feeding history, weight trend, shell growth, parasite testing, and current heat, UVB, and humidity measurements. Keep transfer and legal documentation.

Choose an alert animal with clear eyes, clean nostrils, a firm intact shell, normal walking, and no wounds or labored breathing. See a reptile veterinarian soon after acquisition for a physical exam and fecal testing.

Use separate tools and quarantine a new tortoise from any other reptiles. Wash hands after contact with the animal or its habitat; reptiles may carry Salmonella while appearing healthy.

Check state and local rules before acquiring, transporting, or housing outdoors. Never release a captive tortoise.

Captive-bred or responsibly rehomed animals with health records make it easier to build an appropriate care plan.

03 | Adult enclosure and outdoor space

Provide the largest practical floor area. An adult needs a broad secure outdoor pen in suitable weather, with room to graze, walk, bask, hide, and move between sun and shade. A planning example is at least about 10 ft x 10 ft for a medium adult; larger lines and animals need much more.

Use solid-sided, climb-resistant walls, safe gates, predator protection, and a sheltered heated house for cool climates. Unlike a sulcata, a leopard tortoise is generally less powerful at digging, but still needs robust containment and an escape check.

For indoor juveniles use an open tortoise table or custom floor pen, not a tiny aquarium. Increase space promptly as the tortoise grows. Include multiple hides, safe grazing plants, and a dry basking area.

Indoor housing is a nursery or weather backup for many adults. Make a realistic adult plan before acquiring a hatchling.

04 | Substrate, humidity and humid hide

Leopard tortoises generally need a drier overall environment than red-footed tortoises, but juveniles still need safe hydration and a humid retreat to support healthy growth. Guidance varies with age, climate, and enclosure design.

Use a low-dust, safe substrate that is easy to clean and allows natural behavior. Provide a humid hide or slightly moist retreat for juveniles while keeping the main basking surface dry. Avoid mold, standing water, cedar, sharp items, and loose material likely to be eaten.

Measure humidity at animal level with a hygrometer. Keep ventilation adequate and protect the tortoise from cold wet conditions. Review the setup with a reptile veterinarian if shell growth is abnormal.

Feed on a tile or shallow dish rather than directly on sand or loose substrate to reduce ingestion risk.

Avoid both extremes: continuously wet, cold quarters and a dry setup without drinking water or a moist retreat for a growing juvenile.

05 | Heat gradient and weather shelter

Many care references use a basking surface around 95-105°F (35-40°C), a warm zone around 85-90°F (29-32°C), and a cooler zone around 75-80°F (24-27°C). Confirm target readings and measurement method with an experienced reptile veterinarian.

Use a guarded overhead heat source and measure the surface with an infrared thermometer. Place digital probes at warm and cool ends. A thermostat can control appropriate heat devices, especially for overnight shelter.

Outdoor tortoises need a dry, heated, secure house when weather becomes cool, wet, or windy. Keep nights warm enough for the individual and climate; do not allow a cold tortoise to digest slowly or become ill.

Leopard tortoises do not brumate. Keep a safe warm plan for all seasons and power outages.

Provide shade and cooler retreat. A basking lamp cannot make an unsafe cold or damp shelter suitable.

06 | UVB and daytime lighting

Indoor leopard tortoises need reptile-appropriate UVB across a basking zone for normal calcium metabolism. Follow the bulb maker’s distance and reflector requirements and keep glass or plastic out of the light path.

Provide a gradient between a measured UVB basking zone and shaded hides. Record lamp model and installation date; visible light may continue after useful UVB fades. Replace on the manufacturer’s schedule or based on measured output.

Use a regular daytime photoperiod, often around 10-12 hours, with seasonal adjustment only if advised. Outdoors, unfiltered sunlight supplies UVB, but provide shade and a secure heated shelter.

Bright visible light supports a normal day cycle. Keep darkness at night and protect the tortoise from overheating in sun.

UVB exposure, calcium, and appropriate heat work together. Supplements do not replace a working UVB setup.

07 | Grass-based herbivore diet

Leopard tortoises are grazers. Build meals around safe grasses and grass hay such as timothy, orchard, or Bermuda, plus pesticide-free weeds and edible flowers. Dandelion, plantain, and other safe fibrous plants can add variety.

Dark leafy greens and prickly pear pads may supplement a varied diet. Fruit should be avoided or kept very rare because sugar-rich foods can upset digestion and displace fiber.

Do not feed meat, insects, eggs, dairy, dog or cat food, bread, or processed foods. Avoid toxic garden plants and forage from lawns exposed to chemicals or animal waste.

A complete tortoise pellet can be a small measured supplement if a veterinarian recommends it, but should not replace grasses and forage.

Identify every wild plant before feeding it. Keep high-fiber grazing foods as the foundation of the diet.

08 | Feeding, calcium and growth monitoring

Offer safe forage daily or follow a veterinarian-directed schedule. Adjust portions to age, pasture access, activity, and body condition. Weigh juveniles regularly and track shell length and growth rather than feeding to constant begging.

Calcium and multivitamin supplementation depend on UVB, natural sunlight, diet, and age. Ask the veterinarian for a product and schedule; excessive vitamin D3 or vitamin A can harm. Do not combine powders without checking labels.

Monitor shell shape, gait, appetite, stool, and weight. Soft shell, abnormal shell growth, weakness, or weight change needs review of diet, UVB, hydration, and temperature.

Provide fresh water daily in a shallow stable dish. Keep it clean, easy to enter, and easy to exit.

Bring feeding and weight logs to annual exams. An internet portion chart is not a prescription for one tortoise.

09 | Bathing, soaking and hydration

Keep clean drinking water available at all times. Many tortoise care plans include shallow warm soaks, especially for juveniles, newly adopted animals, or those with specific hydration needs. Ask the veterinarian how often to soak your tortoise.

A common routine is about 10-15 minutes in shallow lukewarm water once or a few times weekly, adjusted to age, health, and climate. The tortoise must be able to stand, keep its head above the water, and exit easily.

Supervise continuously. Do not use soap, salts, oils, or additives. Stop if the animal is weak, distressed, or chilled; dry gently and return it to the correct thermal gradient.

Soaking does not replace water access, diet, appropriate humidity, or veterinary treatment.

Never leave the tortoise unattended in water. A shallow bath can still be dangerous if the animal is weak or overturned.

10 | Handling, compatibility and enrichment

Leopard tortoises are best observed and allowed to graze and explore. Lift only when needed, using both hands under the shell and keeping the tortoise close to a safe surface. Do not lift by limbs or tail or turn it upside down.

House individually as the safest default. Males may ram or harass other tortoises, and multiple animals can compete for food, basking, and shelter. Do not mix species.

Keep dogs, cats, and children physically separated from the enclosure. A dog attack can be fatal, and a large tortoise can injure people or smaller animals by stepping or pushing.

Enrichment can include safe forage, grazing rotation, stable hides, gentle terrain, shade, and supervised outdoor access. Avoid slippery steep slopes and objects that can overturn the animal.

Never treat a tortoise as a riding toy. Children should help only with direct adult supervision and handwashing.

11 | Daily care, health and veterinary schedule

Daily: check heat, UVB, water, food, stool, shade, and shelter. Remove soiled food and substrate. Weekly: inspect shell, limbs, lamps, guards, fence, and body condition.

Schedule a baseline reptile-vet exam after acquisition, including shell and mouth review, weight, fecal testing, and habitat assessment. Plan annual wellness and fecal checks, or more often for juveniles or illness.

Sign	Action
Nasal discharge, wheezing, open-mouth breathing	Prompt veterinary call
Closed or swollen eyes, appetite loss, lethargy	Prompt examination
Soft shell, tremors, weakness, abnormal growth	Urgent husbandry review
Dog attack, wound, collapse, prolapse	Emergency care
Weight loss or repeated abnormal stool	Prompt exam with records

Do not give human medicines, antibiotics, dewormers, or high-dose vitamins without veterinary advice. Bring lamp details, temperature records, food labels, and enclosure photos.

Find a reptile veterinarian before adoption. Cold, wet conditions and poor lighting can cause serious illness.

12 | Approximate U.S. costs and long-term planning

Initial setup costs vary widely. A juvenile indoor enclosure, heat, UVB, substrate, hides, and monitoring equipment may cost about $500-$2,000+. Adult outdoor space, secure fencing, and a heated shelter can increase the investment substantially, especially in colder climates.

Expense	Planning range (USD)
Juvenile indoor setup	$500-$2,000+
Adult pen and heated shelter	$1,500-$8,000+; site dependent
Food, substrate, bulbs and power	$40-$150/month
Annual exam and fecal test	about $100-$300; call clinics
Emergency reserve	$1,000+ suggested

Costs depend on adult size, winter temperatures, land, electricity, food supply, and veterinary access. Get local construction and clinic quotes; insurance may not be available for every tortoise or condition.

A low purchase price does not make the lifetime commitment small. Budget for an adult habitat and decades of heating and care.

13 | Travel, book reference and responsible rehoming

Before travel, arrange an experienced caretaker who can check water, lighting, temperatures, shelter, food, and security. Give written instructions and an emergency veterinarian contact. Never leave the tortoise in a parked car or an unprotected outdoor pen.

The supplied book listing is The Complete Leopard Tortoise Beginner’s Handbook: A Practical Guide to Housing... by Arden Wythe (2026, ISBN 9798184776804, 254 pages). Confirm the full listing subtitle and edition with the seller. This guide is an original summary, not copied from the book.

Never release a captive tortoise. For rehoming, contact an established tortoise rescue or reptile veterinarian and provide legal records, feeding history, lamp information, and enclosure details.

Arrange a future care plan for moves, illness, and retirement. This tortoise may live longer than its first owner.

Sources and further reading

Prepared as an original educational summary. It does not reproduce chapters from the supplied book. Husbandry recommendations can vary with animal size, health, climate, and measurement method; confirm your setup with a reptile veterinarian.

- User-supplied eBay listing - The Complete Leopard Tortoise Beginner’s Handbook, Arden Wythe
- Royal Veterinary College - Leopard tortoise care factsheet (2024)
- Tree of Life Exotic Pet Medical Center - Leopard Tortoise Care
- Merck Veterinary Manual - Important husbandry requirements for selected reptiles
- Maryland Zoo - Leopard Tortoise
- SpectrumCare - Leopard Tortoise costs (2025-2026 estimates)

When advice conflicts, prioritize an experienced reptile veterinarian who has examined the animal, use measured environmental data, and avoid abrupt changes to heat, lighting, diet, or seasonal activity.