

Hibernating An Adult Tortoise

Early October...

At this stage you would have already measured and weighed your tortoise. If you have a Spur Thigh or Hermanns tortoise, you would have used the Jackson Ratio graph to decide that your tortoise is heavy enough to hibernate. This graph is not suitable for Russian or Marginated tortoises, but if your tortoise is at least the same weight or heavier than last year than hibernation can proceed. So it's all systems go!

Hopefully you would have been bringing in your torts at night and giving them a little heat boost under their basking lamp before putting them out in the morning.

This must now stop and your tortoise must live out in the garden permanently again so that he is aware that the temperatures are dropping and it's time to prepare for a nice long sleep.

You therefore **MUST** have a dry sleep box available at all times for them to return to during the day and to sleep in during the night. Pack it full of bedding as this helps to prevent draughts.

If frost is forecast overnight, move your tortoise in his sleepbox to somewhere that is frost free but still cool – eg garage or shed.

Keep on offering food for the first couple of days, but stop the moment he isn't too interested and concentrate on getting his bowel empty. Bath your tortoise once this week in very cool water.

As the weeks go by and the temperatures drop your tortoise will become less and less active. He may only venture just outside his sleepbox for a few hours before disappearing back inside.

Do not allow him to sit out in the wind and rain for hours – pop him back just inside the sleepbox with the door open so that he can sit and watch the world go by in the dry.

As the temperatures drop even further he may only come out occasionally every few days and this is perfectly normal. Give him a final very cool bath, drying him well with kitchen roll or a towel.

At this point have a quick look around the body making sure everything looks in order. Look inside the mouth to make sure there are no food particles left – these will rot if left. If there are, use a Qtip to fish out.

When he has not moved at all for ten days, it is then time to 'box him up'. A good thick cardboard box is called for. Not too big but allowing room to shuffle a little back and forth. It is more likely that he will try to move up and down to get warmer or colder.

Put a thick layer of bedding on the bottom. By thick, I mean half the depth of the box. You want the tortoise to be sitting in the middle of the box so that he can shuffle down deeper if he so wishes. Use shredded newspaper/magazines, or dried leaves (make sure they are perfectly dry) or a mixture of both. Straw and hay are not recommended because dust particles can enter the nose.

Before putting your tortoise in, have a final look around the body. Check the eyes – he will probably have disturbed a little and may even open an eye to give you a filthy look for

waking him up! Check the nostrils are clear – they are called nares in a tortoise, by the way.

Finally, check the tail area making sure there are no dried faeces left.

Pop him in the box and pile on a little bedding. Then lay the probe of your digital thermometer on top with the lead and reader hanging out of the box. Then pile on more bedding right to the top. Close down the top and put just a couple of airholes in the lid – remember your tortoise's heartbeat will only be once a minute by now and the amount of oxygen used is minimal.

Then place this box inside another or use your wooden sleepbox if it is big enough. Use more shredded newspaper or polystyrene chips to pack out the gaps between the boxes, both on the bottom, sides and top as this gives extra insulation. Remember to allow your thermometer display to be easily read without having to open the box actually containing your tortoise.

Place the box in the position you have chosen for him to spend the winter.

Temperature is critical. You must use a thermometer.

You must aim to achieve to as close to 5c as much of the time as possible. You must check the temperature daily. If it goes above 8c you will be getting to the point where your tortoise will begin to stir. Move his box towards the door of the garage or shed because normally it's cooler there. Or keep the door open for a while. There was a mild spell last January and most people were having to move their boxes back out into the garden itself to keep them cool enough. If you do find your tortoise is awake because he has become too warm, you must wake him up completely. Chemical changes have taken place in the body and you must go through the waking up procedure.

Going the other way temperature wise, if your tortoise gets too cold then there is a risk at 0c that frost will damage his eyes and internal organs. If the weather forecast is for a really cold night then insulate your tortoise further by placing a blanket around the box.

Thermometers with an alarm are well advisable. You will be able to set the parameters for 3c and 8c and the alarm will go off to warn you.

Apart from checking the temperature on a daily basis, you must physically check your tortoise once a week. Bring him out of his box and look around his body to check everything is in order. Then check the box for any signs of going to the toilet. If your tortoise has done either you will have to wake him up. Something is not quite right and it is not worth the risk. Go through the waking up procedure and call the society for advice.

Many tortoise keepers are now turning to the refrigeration method of hibernation because most of the time it is difficult to keep your tortoise cool enough. Ask us about this method.

Timewise, your adult tortoise needs to be woken the first couple of days in March at the latest. Even if we are under snow!

See separate sheet for waking up process. Your tortoise will have to live inside with a basking lamp because it will usually be too cold for him to go outside to start with.