

Hibernating Young Tortoises

With adult tortoises the weather takes charge of their pre-hibernation slow down but with young tortoises **you** have to control the slowdown.

It does sound daunting but in fact it isn't that difficult.

By the end of September you would have your young tortoise inside nearly all of the time, unless we are having an Indian Summer, and definitely every night. Keep it warm and eating as usual.

We think the best time for your young torts to be asleep is over Christmas so that you don't have to tend to them during this busy period.

So carry on as usual up until mid November. Then over the next 4 weeks imitate autumn coming by taking the following actions:-

- Week 1 Reduce the basking lamp to 4 hours a day for the first 5 days (10am till 2pm) and then to 2 hours a day for the last two days (10am till 12 noon). Keep the background heating, usually your central heating, as normal through the week. Keep offering food and bath twice during this week.
- Week 2 No lamps at all for this week. Keep the central heating the same for the week. You will notice a change already without the lamps – the smaller the tortoise the quicker he will slow down. Stop offering food the moment he loses interest or definitely by mid week. Bath twice this week. During the last few days of this week, lower the heating in the room slightly.
- Week 3 Now it's time to turn off the central heating in the room or move your tortoise accommodation to an unheated room. Still bath twice this week, but make the water cooler than usual so it's not a shock. At this point we want to make sure the tortoise has emptied its bowels but not had a wee this week. A tortoise needs an empty gut/bowel but a full bladder for hibernation.
- Week 4 Time to open the window during the day and get the temperature down as low as you can to the preferred 5c. Be security conscience and don't leave the window open all night! Hopefully your tortoise has emptied its bowel for the final time but not had a wee. Your tortoise should be very sleepy during this week and out for the count by the end of it. If you are having difficulty getting the temperature down, give us a call.

In Week 4 you may have trouble getting the temperature down lower and you may have to move your tortoise somewhere even cooler. Do phone us for advice if you are having trouble.

When your tortoise hasn't moved for 3 or 4 days, then it's time to box them 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 it will try to move up and down to get warmer or colder, so they need a little room to do this.

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 no longer recommended because dust particles/mites can enter the nostrils – these holes are called nares in a tortoise.

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 nares (nostrils) are clear. Look inside the mouth, if possible, to make sure there are no food particles left. If there are, use a Qtip to fish them out.

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

Pop him in the box and lay the probe of your digital thermometer on top of his shell 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 about once a minute by now and the amount of oxygen used is minimal.

Then place this box inside another slightly larger cardboard box or preferably use your wooden sleepbox. Put a thick layer of flat newspaper on the bottom before placing it in. Use more shredded newspaper or polystyrene chips to pack out the gaps between the boxes, both on the sides and top as this gives extra insulation. Remember to drag the lead of your thermometer outside the second box and put the temperature display on top of the outside box so that it can be easily read without having to open either box.

Place the box in the position you have chosen for him to spend the winter in the shed or garage. We now recommend the refrigeration method – ask us for advice.

Temperature is critical. You must use a thermometer.

Too high and the tortoise will wake. You cannot put it back into hibernation, you must wake it fully and keep it awake. Too low and frost can damage the eyes and internal organs. If a frost is forecast wrap a duvet, sleeping bag, thick rug or blankets around the box for extra insulation.

Check the temperature at least daily. Weekly give your tortoise a physical check over – quickly 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 urine or faeces. If your tortoise has done either, clear it up but put him back in and cover him all up again. Phone HTS for advice. You may have to wake him up. If he has urinated you will definitely have to wake him up. Something is not quite right and it is not worth the risk. Go through the waking up procedure but unless you discover the problem before 10am, wait until the following morning to wake him up. This is so that he falls into a natural day/night cycle.

On a first hibernation go for 6 weeks from boxing up and add a week each year.

ANY DOUBTS, GIVE US A CALL. We're here to help.