

Life with a Sulcata Tortoise: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

One of our most recognizable personalities at events is Sheldon the sulcata tortoise. He is delightfully grumpy and EVERYONE loves him, especially kids! We've even met several people who have expressed their desire to own a tortoise like him, calling him a "dream pet." While sulcatas are incredibly smart and each has their own amazing(ly stubborn) personality, they are definitely not for everyone!

Sulcata tortoises can easily grow to over 100lbs and live for over 100yrs. If you have one, you will need to provide for it in your will! It can also be hard to care for a 100+lb animal. How would you get it in the car and to the vet if it had a medical emergency? Some sulcatas, especially males, can be very territorial in their space. Having a large (though slow) adult sulcata charge you can be dangerous, especially to children or the elderly, who may not be able to move out of the way quick enough. They have also been known to topple and destroy various things in their yards, including gutters, ladders, playsets, etc. Once they decide something is invading their area, you aren't going to save it unless you remove it. Did we mention they are stubborn? Males are also known for humping anything that is even slightly tortoise-shaped, such as umbrella stands and heads of lettuce.



Sulcatas are native to the grasslands of Africa. Most of their diet consists of grass, hay and weeds; this is somewhat difficult to reproduce in captivity, but not impossible. In the summer, grass and weeds like dandelions, clover, violets and plantains are easy to find in your yard (as long as you don't use any weedkillers!) The bigger they get, the more they will eat! A juvenile to adult sulcata will eat a pile of veggies and hay roughly the size of their shell, so your grocery bill during the winter is going to be pretty high! These tortoises need to be kept warm all year, and have UVB lighting and calcium + vitamin D supplementation to prevent the development of metabolic bone disease (MBD), which is very common in captive reptiles. A pyramided shell (one that has points and is not completely smooth) is a sign of internal health issues such as MBD. Our Sheldon suffered from this early in life, which is why his shell is not smooth, but fortunately he came to us before it could cause him any lasting problems.

Sulcatas are almost constantly grazing, and as pets have been known to eat things they should not be eating, like clothing. Their area needs to be tortoise-proofed to make sure they don't eat your socks, shoes, toys, and similar items. Foreign objects can get stuck in their digestive tract, which can be fatal if they aren't surgically removed. This surgery is extremely expensive and very dangerous, since a vet has to cut through the bottom of the shell in order to get into their abdomen.

Wild sulcatas spend a lot of their time underground in elaborate burrows they dig themselves. Those powerful front legs are made to move dirt, and lots of it! Any and all landscaping in their area is going to turn into a dirt pile as they attempt to recreate their burrows in your yard. They are extremely strong and we often refer to them as bulldozers. As soon as Sheldon hit 30-35lbs, he escaped several times by pushing fence panels off the fence posts, literally removing the nails from the wood. Tortoises are faster than they look, and they can get away from you sooner than you realize.



During the winter, when they must be kept indoors (they CANNOT hibernate), they will put their ability to demolish to use in your home! They can move furniture, scratch walls and floors, and larger ones have been known to dig right through drywall! You also can't potty-train them, and they will poop and pee everywhere. Take our advice, you DO NOT want them to pee on your carpet; the smell is terrible and almost impossible to get out. Even on vinyl flooring, you will have to do a LOT of scrubbing to get the poop and white urates out.



Sheldon HATES winter. Every year once he's inside, it's a constant battle to keep him warm. He usually will avoid any basking areas that we set up for him, find a dark corner, and refuse to leave. He makes a constant knocking noise as he tries to burrow into the wall with his feet, and slams his shell on the floor when he gets angry. He likes to get behind furniture to simulate being in a burrow, and will move couches, beds and other items to squeeze himself in. His legs also scratch paint off the walls and can gouge drywall. Larger sulcatas have been known to dig right through drywall!



Since Sheldon refuses to stay in warm areas, he also doesn't feel good enough to eat. We are constantly trying to entice him to eat, by changing his surroundings, trying to hand-feed him, and offering his favorite foods. Every winter it is the same battle. He will often go days and weeks without food, while we stress about his well-being and try to make sure he maintains his weight, often with the help of our vets. Tortoises are much too strong for us to pry his mouth open and make him eat. Recently, he went over a month without food, prompting another vet trip. They found no physical illness that would cause him to stop eating; he is just stubborn and refusing to cooperate. He underwent surgery to have a feeding tube installed through his neck, so that we can put food directly into his stomach. He has to be manually fed twice a day, and the feeding tube flushed each time. The expenses resulting from his feeding tube (which he will occasionally pull out, resulting in more vet bills to replace it), are not cheap. This year we are looking at a bill of over \$600 just for vet care, and winter is only halfway over!

Sulcatas are beautiful, amazing animals who are full of personality, and we understand why everyone loves our Sheldon! However, these animals can be extremely costly and high maintenance, especially during the winter, and they can do much more damage than their normally calm demeanor suggests. You should always do your research before getting a new pet, and make sure you have a good vet lined up to call if and when things go wrong. If anything we said here gives you pause, consider getting another pet, or even a smaller species of tortoise, such as a Russian tortoise.

