

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Box Turtle

Humid woodlands, earthworms and the case against wild-caught animals



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

*If you grew up anywhere near Lancaster County, you probably know the moment: a damp May morning, a quiet back lane, and a little domed shell the color of old leaves moving along the edge of the road with total, unhurried confidence. Box turtles are one of the most charming animals in the American woods. They are also one of the most misunderstood pets in the country. A box turtle is not a starter animal you keep for a few years. It is a **40 to 50+ year companion** that needs real humidity, real sunlight-quality light, a varied omnivore diet, and a keeper who understands that the best box turtle experience is a quiet, observed, respectful one rather than a cuddly one. It also comes with a hard truth we want to say right up front: **wild box turtle populations are declining, and the only ethical way to keep one is a captive-bred animal obtained legally.** This guide walks you through everything, from your first 48 hours to the long decades ahead, in the same plain, practical way we'd talk it through at our own kitchen table. Read the Quick Start first, check your state's rules before you do anything else, and build the habitat before the turtle ever comes home.*

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Check your state rules and confirm your turtle is captive-bred before anything else.** Taking box turtles from the wild is illegal in many states. **In Pennsylvania you cannot keep an eastern (woodland) box turtle at all:** state rules set its possession limit at zero and also bar bringing native reptiles in from other states (see Meet Your Box Turtle). Elsewhere, look up your state wildlife agency's rules, buy only from a reputable breeder or adopt from a rescue, and get the hatch date and breeder information in writing. A federal FDA rule in place since 1975 bans the sale of turtles and tortoises with a shell under 4 inches long, except for bona fide scientific, educational or exhibition purposes (not as pets) and for export, so a tiny "baby" offered as a pet is a red flag.
2. **Build the complete enclosure before the turtle arrives.** The indoor minimum is roughly **4' × 2' of floor space** (8' × 4' is ideal for an adult), open-topped or well ventilated, with sides tall and solid enough that your turtle can't climb out. Fill it with **4 to 6 inches of damp, moisture-holding substrate.**
3. **Create your heat gradient and verify it with real thermometers.** Basking surface **85–90°F**, daytime ambient air **70–80°F**, nighttime **65–70°F**. Put every heat source on a thermostat and confirm the numbers with a probe thermometer and an infrared temperature gun, not a stick-on strip.
4. **Install the UVB lamp and run it for a full day before the turtle arrives.** Box turtles are **Ferguson Zone 2–3** animals. The Ferguson zone system sorts reptiles by how much natural UV they get in the wild, and zones 2 and 3 describe animals of forest edges and dappled sun. Mount a linear UVB tube at the manufacturer's recommended distance, on a 12-hour on, 12-hour off schedule.
5. **Get humidity working.** Target **60–80%** on a digital hygrometer at turtle height, with one end of the substrate deep and damp, a humid hide, and daily misting. Dry indoor air is the number one silent killer of captive box turtles.
6. **Add hides, a shallow soaking dish and cover.** Two hides (one warm, one humid), a shallow dish your turtle can easily climb in and out of, and leaf litter or live plants to break up sight lines.
7. **Offer a first meal, then leave things quiet.** A few earthworms, chopped dark leafy greens and a bit of strawberry is a perfect welcome. Don't worry if it's ignored for a day or two; a new turtle often stays shut in its shell for a while.
8. **Give your turtle 48 to 72 hours to settle with almost no handling.** Quiet checks on food and water only.
9. **Wash your hands every single time.** Like all reptiles, box turtles can carry **Salmonella** without being sick. Wash with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds after touching the turtle, the dish, or anything inside the enclosure.

10. **Find a reptile-experienced vet now, and quarantine the newcomer.** Book an exam with a fecal parasite check within the first few weeks, and keep the new arrival apart from any other reptiles or turtles for at least 90 days.

First-Time Starter Bundle

What needs to be in the house on day one, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **An open-topped, well-ventilated enclosure with roughly 4' × 2' of floor space or more** — a sturdy tub, stock-style tank, or wooden turtle table with opaque, smooth sides tall enough that your turtle cannot climb out. Avoid sealed glass aquariums; they trap humidity without airflow and invite respiratory trouble.
- **A deep, moisture-retaining substrate mix** — a blend of cypress mulch, chemical-free topsoil and sphagnum moss, enough to fill the enclosure 4 to 6 inches deep.
- **A basking lamp with a thermostat or dimming controller** — a halogen or incandescent flood-style heat lamp aimed at one spot to create an 85–90°F basking surface, with the thermostat probe at the surface your turtle will actually sit on.
- **A linear UVB tube suitable for Ferguson Zone 2–3** — mounted over the basking area at the manufacturer's recommended distance, covering enough length that the turtle can choose its dose.
- **A thermostat-controlled ambient or night heat source** — a ceramic heat emitter or radiant panel to keep nighttime temperatures between 65 and 70°F if your home gets colder than that.
- **Two digital probe thermometers and an infrared temperature gun** — one probe at basking level, one at the cool end, plus a gun for spot-checking surfaces.
- **A digital hygrometer** — placed at turtle height, away from the water dish and the heat lamp, so you read the humidity your turtle actually lives in.
- **A shallow, heavy water dish** — wide and low enough that your turtle can climb in and out, sturdy enough that it won't tip, and big enough for a full soak.
- **At least two hides** — a cork bark or half-log hide at the warm end and a damp, moss-lined humid hide at the cooler end.
- **A spray bottle or mister** — for the daily misting that keeps the humid zone humid.
- **A feeder starter pack** — live earthworms or nightcrawlers, plus a small colony of dubia roaches or other gut-loaded feeder insects.
- **Plain calcium powder (no D3) and a reptile multivitamin** — for the supplement schedule.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: [Reptile and Amphibian Enclosures](#) and [Reptile and Amphibian Terrarium Supplies & Accessories](#).

Enrichment

- **A thick layer of natural leaf litter** — oak and maple leaves from a clean, pesticide-free source give your turtle something to burrow beneath and forage through.
- **Turtle-safe live plants** — hostas, violets, nasturtiums, clover and ferns add humidity, cover and snacks. Skip anything you can't confirm is non-toxic.
- **Logs, bark and rounded stones** — gentle terrain to explore. Keep slopes shallow; box turtles can flip and struggle to right themselves.
- **A foraging dig** — a corner where you bury a few earthworms turns mealtime into a hunt.

- **Visual barriers** — cork rounds, bark panels or tall plants that split the enclosure into "rooms" so a shy turtle can move without feeling exposed.
- **A secure outdoor pen** — for warm days, the single best enrichment you can give. Details are in the Enclosure section.
- **A ventilated travel container** — for vet visits, lined with a damp paper towel.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Reptile and Amphibian Accessories.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Box Turtle

Box turtles belong to the genus *Terrapene*, a group of mostly land-dwelling North American turtles that live in woodlands, forest edges, damp meadows and (in the ornate box turtle's case) open prairie. They forage through leaf litter for worms, slugs, snails, insects, mushrooms and berries, and they retreat into damp hollows or self-dug depressions when the weather turns too hot, too dry or too cold. A woodland box turtle may spend its entire life within a few acres, which is one of the most important facts in this guide, and we will come back to it.

What makes a box turtle a box turtle is its shell. The top of the shell is called the **carapace**, and the belly shell is called the **plastron**. In box turtles the plastron has a **hinge** across the middle, which lets the turtle pull its head, legs and tail inside and close the front and back plastron lobes tight against the carapace like a lid. The shell is made up of bony plates covered by individual keratin plates called **scutes** (the same material as your fingernails). Healthy scutes show growth rings, and a box turtle that suddenly shuts up tight is not being rude. It is doing the one thing its whole body is designed to do when it feels unsafe.

Trait	Detail
Common name	Box turtle (Eastern, Three-toed, Gulf Coast, Ornate and others)
Genus	<i>Terrapene</i>
Native range	Eastern, Southern and Central United States, with related species into Mexico
Wild habitat	Deciduous woodland, forest edge, damp meadow, prairie (ornate)
Hatchling size	About 1 to 1.5 inches shell length
Adult size	About 5–7 inches shell length
Typical lifespan	40–50+ years with good care, sometimes far longer
Activity pattern	Diurnal and crepuscular; most active in the morning, in the evening and after rain
Social structure	Solitary; males can be aggressive toward one another
Temperament	Shy, stress-prone, best as an observed animal
Diet	Omnivore — animal protein and plants in a balance that shifts with age

The four box turtles you are most likely to meet

Species and subspecies	Adult shell length	How to recognize it	Habitat and humidity notes
Eastern box turtle (<i>Terrapene carolina carolina</i>)	5–6 inches, up to about 7	High, domed shell; dark brown carapace with irregular yellow or orange streaks and blotches; males often have red eyes, females brown or yellowish	Moist woodland and forest edge; needs the highest humidity (60–80%) and a deep, damp substrate
Three-toed box turtle (<i>Terrapene carolina triunguis</i>)	5–6 inches	Plainer, olive or tan shell with little pattern; often three toes on the hind foot (not always reliable); males frequently have bright orange-red on the head	Woodland and wet meadows in the southern and central states; similar humidity needs to the Eastern

Species and subspecies	Adult shell length	How to recognize it	Habitat and humidity notes
Gulf Coast box turtle (<i>Terrapene carolina major</i>)	6–7 inches, sometimes larger	The largest of the group; long, flared, saddle-shaped carapace; often dark with a faint pattern; males sometimes show a greenish head	Humid coastal Gulf plains and swamp edges; needs reliably warm, damp conditions
Ornate box turtle (<i>Terrapene ornata ornata</i>)	4.5–6 inches	Flatter shell; radiating yellow lines on every scute like a sunburst; males have red eyes and a thick, curved rear foot claw	Open prairie and sandy grassland; tolerates somewhat drier air, but still needs a humid retreat

One caution about the table: all four are regulated, and **ornate and desert-edge forms are not "easy" just because they tolerate somewhat drier air**. They still shelter in burrows where the air is damp, so they need a humid retreat too.

Lifespan and the succession plan

Box turtles routinely live **40 to 50 years in good care**, and some individuals live much longer. Claims of 80 or 100 years are repeated often and are hard to verify, but nobody who works with these animals is surprised when a turtle outlives its first two or three keepers. This is a gift and a responsibility. A child who brings home a box turtle at eight years old may still be caring for it at sixty. Put it in your family plans: name a backup caretaker, write down the turtle's diet, enclosure setup, vet records and quirks, and tell your family that this animal is not something that can be sold at a yard sale or released at the park. A well-loved turtle that moves from one prepared keeper to the next is how these animals live out their full lives.

The wild-caught warning, and what to do if you find a turtle

This is the most important section in this guide. Please read it carefully.

Wild box turtle populations are in decline. Road mortality, habitat loss, lawn equipment, poaching for the pet trade and slow reproduction have all taken their toll. Many wild turtles take a decade to reach breeding age, so a population that loses its adults can take generations to recover, if it ever does.

Because of this, **wild-caught box turtles should never be kept or bought**. Taking them from the wild is illegal in many states.

Pennsylvania rules. Under the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's regulations, the woodland (eastern) box turtle, *Terrapene carolina carolina*, has no open season and a possession limit of zero (58 Pa. Code § 79.3), so it is illegal to take one from the wild or to keep one. The same rules make it unlawful to bring a native reptile into Pennsylvania from another state (§ 79.10), and to buy or sell a native reptile taken in Pennsylvania or its offspring (§ 79.9). In practice, Pennsylvanians should not plan on keeping an eastern box turtle, even a captive-bred one. Other box turtles, such as the three-toed and ornate box turtles, are not covered by those native-species limits, but confirm with the Fish and Boat Commission before you buy one.

Rules vary a great deal from state to state, so check your state wildlife agency's regulations before you acquire any box turtle, and buy only a captive-bred animal from a reputable breeder, or adopt one through a reptile rescue or herpetological society. Ask for hatch date, parentage and any paperwork your state requires. A federal FDA rule in place since 1975 bans the sale of turtles and tortoises with a shell under 4 inches long, except for bona fide scientific, educational or exhibition purposes (not as pets) and for export, which means a legitimate breeder will not be advertising "baby" box turtles in that size range as pets.

Never relocate a wild turtle. Box turtles have a strong homing instinct and a small home range that they know like the back of their hand. A turtle moved even a mile or two will often spend the rest of its life walking in a straight line trying to get home, crossing roads, running into new dogs and cars, and missing the food, shelter and nesting sites it knows. Relocated turtles also spread disease into new local populations. That means **do not take a wild turtle home, do not move it "to a safer spot" across town, and do not release a captive turtle into the wild** (a turtle that has lived in captivity may carry illnesses that would harm wild populations).

If you find a turtle crossing a road, here's the right move, and only if it is safe for you to stop:

1. Check for traffic and pull well off the road.
2. Pick the turtle up with both hands, holding it level and low over the ground. Many will pee when picked up; that is a normal stress response.
3. Carry it a short distance to the far side of the road, **in the direction it was heading**, and set it down in cover.
4. Never turn it around. A turtle placed back on the side it came from will simply try to cross again.

If a turtle is visibly injured (cracked shell, bleeding, hit by a mower), put it in a ventilated box lined with a damp towel, keep it cool and quiet, and call your state wildlife agency or a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. If you already have a turtle of uncertain origin, ask your state wildlife agency or a local herpetological society what is legal and best for the animal. Do not just release it.

Temperament

A box turtle is **not a cuddly pet**. It is shy, quiet and stress-prone, and it mostly wants to be left alone to dig, soak, forage and bask. Many are curious and surprisingly personable: a comfortable turtle will walk right up to the front of its enclosure when you bring worms and develop clear preferences about foods, hiding spots and sunbathing times. But a turtle that is handled too much often stops eating, stays clamped inside its shell and gets sick. The best box turtle keepers are patient observers who enjoy a small, living world they can watch for decades.

What surprises new owners

Three things catch most new keepers off guard. The first is **how much humidity they need**: people picture a turtle on a dry rock under a lamp, and that picture is wrong for this species. The second is **how omnivorous they are**; a box turtle will hunt a slug with startling focus one minute and pick a strawberry apart the next. The third is **how long the commitment lasts**. You are not buying a pet for a decade. You are taking on an animal that may outlive your career.

SECTION 3

Enclosure Setup & Layout

Box turtles are walkers, foragers and diggers, not climbers or swimmers. They need a lot of **floor space** and very little height. Think of a small slice of woodland floor, not an aquarium.

Indoor enclosure basics

The indoor minimum for a single adult is roughly 4' × 2', and bigger is better; 8' × 4' is ideal. A turtle with plenty of room to explore is a more active, more relaxed turtle.

Enclosure type	Good for	Notes
Large plastic tub or stock-style tank	Juveniles and adults	Inexpensive, light, easy to clean; choose opaque sides and drill or cut ventilation; keep the rim smooth
Wooden turtle table (sealed, melamine- or polyurethane-coated)	Adults	Best long-term indoor option; hold moisture well when properly sealed; allows custom length
Sealed glass aquarium	Not recommended	Traps humidity without airflow, a recipe for respiratory problems; clear sides cause constant stress and glass-walking
Wire cage or open screen	Not recommended	Humidity can't be held; wire can injure legs and scutes
Outdoor pen	Best option in warm months	Natural sun, rain, soil and food; see below

Sides should be secure. Box turtles climb more than people expect. If a turtle can get a front foot on a corner, a plant stake or a stack of bark, it will keep going. Make the walls tall enough that the turtle's front feet can't reach the top when it stands up on its hind legs, with a smooth, solid surface and no climbing aids near the edge. Opaque walls help too, because a turtle that can see through clear walls tries to walk through them.

Indoor layout: zones, temperatures and humidity

Imagine the enclosure as a long rectangle viewed from above. Here is the layout, from the warm end to the damp end, written so you could sketch it on a piece of graph paper.

Zone	Where it goes	Temperature	Humidity	What lives here
Basking zone	One short end of the enclosure, directly under the lamp and UVB tube	Basking surface 85–90°F	Lower (50–60%)	A flat stone or slab of cork bark in the open, a shallow patch of lightly damp substrate
Warm hide	Beside the basking zone, just outside the heat cone	78–82°F	60–70%	A half-log or cork hide, open to the basking area
Open foraging zone	Center of the enclosure	72–80°F	60–75%	Leaf litter, live plants, a scatter of bark and stones
Soaking station	Between the center and the cool end	72–76°F	70–80%	Shallow, heavy water dish set into the substrate so the rim is nearly flush

Zone	Where it goes	Temperature	Humidity	What lives here
Humid retreat	Opposite short end from the basking zone	70–75°F	80%+ inside the hide	Deep damp substrate (the full 6 inches), a moss-lined hide, thick leaf litter, live ferns

The idea is a **gradient**. The turtle moves along the length of the tank, sunbathing at one end and dozing in damp cool dirt at the other, and it picks its own temperature the way it would in the woods. Do not try to make the whole enclosure one uniform temperature and humidity; a uniform setup takes the choice away.

Two tips for the layout. First, keep the water dish away from the hottest spot, so it doesn't turn into a warm soup, but still within an easy walk of the basking area. Second, make sure the lamp covers only part of the enclosure. If a heat lamp lights the whole space, there is no cool end, and your turtle has nowhere to go.

Outdoor pen: the best option in warm months

If your climate and your yard allow it, **an outdoor pen is the best home for a box turtle in the warm months**. Natural sunlight is the best UV there is, soil and plants offer endless foraging, rain keeps humidity up, and outdoor turtles are often visibly more active. A good outdoor pen:

- **Has a generous footprint**, at least 8' × 4' for one adult.
- **Has solid walls 12 to 18 inches high** that extend **6 to 12 inches below ground**. Box turtles dig, and a wall that only reaches the surface is just a suggestion.
- **Is covered on top** with sturdy hardware cloth or a latched lid. Raccoons, opossums, crows and dogs all see a turtle as a snack or a toy.
- **Offers sun and deep shade**, with at least half the pen shaded at all times. An all-sun pen in July is dangerous.
- **Includes a shallow, sunken water dish** and several hides, including a mulch-filled "den" to dig into.
- **Is planted with pesticide-free vegetation** such as grass, clover, violets, hostas and ferns. Fertilizers, weed killers and slug bait are all poisonous.
- **Stays away from mowers and dogs**. Never mow with a turtle loose in the yard, and never let dogs share the space.

Bring your turtle inside when overnight temperatures drop below roughly 60°F, or when you can't provide shade in a heat wave.

SECTION 4

Substrate Guide

Substrate is not just a floor covering for a box turtle. It is the humidity system, the burrow, the nursery and the dining room. Aim for **4 to 6 inches of moisture-holding substrate**, kept damp (not soggy) at one end and lightly damp across the rest. When you squeeze a handful, it should hold together without dripping.

Substrate	Best for	Performance	Notes
Cypress mulch + chemical-free topsoil + sphagnum moss (roughly equal parts)	All ages; the recommended standard	Holds moisture, allows burrowing, resists mold when kept right, smells like a forest floor	Stir the layers weekly and re-moisten the humid end; replace the top layer every month or two
Coconut fiber (coco coir) mixed with topsoil	Juveniles and adults	Good humidity retention and soft footing	Mix with soil or mulch; pure coir can dry out quickly and clump
Plain sphagnum moss (as a hide filler and humid layer)	Humid hides and nesting areas	Excellent moisture retention	Use as a top-up layer rather than a full floor; replace when soured
Leaf litter (oak, maple, beech)	Top layer over any base	Cover, enrichment, natural forage	Collect from a clean, pesticide-free area; freeze for a couple of days to remove hitchhikers
Cypress mulch alone	Short-term or the drier basking end	Moderate moisture, tends to dry out	Add topsoil and moss for the humid end
Paper towel	Quarantine, illness, quick vet-recommended recovery setups	Very easy to monitor and clean; no impaction risk	Not a long-term home; does not hold humidity

Avoid outright

- **Sand-only substrates.** Dries fast, holds no humidity, abrades skin and eyes, and is not a natural floor for forest species.
- **Calcium sand.** Impaction risk if swallowed and not a reliable calcium source; remove it from any setup.
- **Cedar and pine shavings.** The aromatic oils irritate airways and can be toxic. No safe use for any reptile.
- **Fine dust-heavy bedding.** Irritates eyes and lungs.
- **Gravel or small decorative pebbles.** Impaction risk and uncomfortable underfoot.
- **Fertilizer-treated or pesticide-treated potting soil.** Choose plain topsoil with no added fertilizer, wetting agents or pest control.
- **Moldy or soured substrate.** If it smells sour or looks slimy or furry, replace it.

Keeping it clean and healthy

Spot-clean daily, stir the substrate weekly to keep it from packing down, re-moisten the humid end as needed, and plan a **full substrate replacement every 2 to 3 months**. Wet, dirty substrate is the leading cause of shell rot, so don't skip this.

SECTION 5

Heat, UVB & Humidity — The 3 Numbers

Getting heat, UVB and humidity right at the same time is the whole game in box turtle husbandry. Each one affects the other two, and the combination of too-dry air and weak light explains most of the health problems vets see in pet box turtles. The three numbers below are your daily dashboard.

Parameter	Target value	How to measure it	What goes wrong when it's off
Basking surface temperature	85–90°F	Infrared temperature gun on the basking surface; probe thermometer at turtle level	Too low: sluggish digestion, poor appetite, weak immune system; too high: burns, dehydration, heat stress
Daytime ambient air temperature	70–80°F	Probe thermometer at mid-enclosure, shaded from the lamp	Under 68°F: lethargy and reduced feeding; over 85°F in the open: overheating and dehydration
Nighttime temperature	65–70°F	Probe thermometer overnight with the lamp off	Under 60°F: stress and respiratory risk; much warmer than needed: can interfere with seasonal rhythm
UVB level (Ferguson Zone 2–3)	UVI roughly 2–4 at the basking surface, with shade available	UVI meter, or the manufacturer's distance chart for the tube	Too low: metabolic bone disease, soft shell, poor appetite; too high: eye irritation and squinting
Ambient humidity	60–80% (higher in the humid retreat)	Digital hygrometer at turtle height	Under 50%: dehydration, pyramiding, swollen or crusty eyes, respiratory trouble; over 85% with no airflow: shell rot and fungus
Substrate moisture	Damp (not soggy), 4–6 inches deep	Squeeze test and digging a finger down to the lower layer	Too dry: no burrow, no humidity; too wet: shell rot, bacterial growth

Temperature: thermostat everything

Every heat source should be on a **thermostat**. Lamps and ceramic emitters can burn a turtle quickly if a bulb sits too close or the room warms up. Put the probe at the spot your turtle actually sits, then check it against an infrared gun. Box turtles are not desert animals: 85 to 90°F at the basking surface is plenty, and a turtle with a cool, damp retreat will use it through the heat of the day.

UVB: why Ferguson Zone 2–3 matters

The **Ferguson zone** system classifies reptiles by how much natural ultraviolet exposure they get in the wild, and it gives keepers a practical way to pick the right lamp and distance. Zone 1 animals live in deep shade or are mostly active at night. Zone 4 animals sit in open desert sun. Box turtles fall in the middle, **Zone 2–3**: they spend time in the dappled light of woodland edges, bask when conditions allow, and retreat to shade the rest of the time.

What that means in practice is that your turtle needs a real UVB source, a gradient with shade available, and no more UVB than a basking woodland animal would get. A linear tube suitable for zones 2 and 3 should be mounted at the distance the manufacturer specifies, with a UVI meter used to check the actual reading if possible. Run it on a **12-hour on, 12-hour off** photoperiod through spring and summer, and trim it modestly in winter. **Replace the tube on the manufacturer's schedule (typically every 6 to 12 months)**, because UVB output fades long before the visible light does. UV does not pass through glass or plastic, so a window is not a substitute.

Outdoor time is an excellent boost. Natural sunlight on a warm day provides a full-spectrum UV dose no lamp matches, so give your turtle outdoor time whenever the weather is warm enough, and always provide shade.

Humidity: the number people miss

Dry air is the single most common cause of illness in pet box turtles, and the problem is usually invisible until the eyes or shell show it. Heated indoor air in winter commonly falls to 20–30% humidity, far below what a box turtle needs.

To hold **60–80%** in a ventilated enclosure, use a deep substrate you re-dampen regularly, mist once or twice daily (concentrating on the humid end), keep a wide, shallow water dish for passive evaporation, maintain a moss-lined humid hide, and let plants and leaf litter trap moisture near the floor. Partially cover the top if the room is very dry, but never seal it, because airflow prevents stale, moldy conditions.

A hygrometer reading of 80% at the humid end with 55–60% over the warm basking end averages out to a perfectly healthy gradient. The turtle is smart enough to pick the humidity it wants, as long as you offer a range.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition



A true omnivore: worms, snails and insects alongside dark leafy greens, squash, and a little fruit. Vitamin A-rich foods help prevent the swollen eyes box turtles are prone to.

Box turtles are **omnivores**: they eat both animal and plant foods, and in the wild they take whatever the forest floor offers. A woodland turtle on a rainy morning will crunch an earthworm, grab a slug, nibble a fallen mushroom and finish with wild strawberries, all within an hour. That variety is the secret to a healthy captive diet. Our own motto for feeding is the same as it is for every animal we care for: **Clean Fuel, No Junk**. Fresh, whole foods, **no mystery ingredients**, and a good variety, not a bowl of the same thing every day.

Protein versus plants, by age

The balance of animal and plant foods shifts as a box turtle grows. Young turtles are building bone and shell quickly, so they need a lot of protein. Adults slow down, and a high-protein diet in a grown turtle can contribute to overgrowth and shell problems. These are practical ranges, not hard laws.

Life stage	Roughly animal protein	Roughly plant matter	Feeding frequency
Hatchling and juvenile (under about 4 years)	Around two-thirds	Around one-third	Daily

Life stage	Roughly animal protein	Roughly plant matter	Feeding frequency
Sub-adult	About half to 60%	About 40 to 50%	Daily or every other day
Adult	About half	About half, tilting toward plants as the turtle ages	3 to 4 times a week

The exact ratio matters less than variety and consistency. If you are offering at least three different animal foods and at least three different plant foods across a week, and your turtle is active, bright-eyed and holding a healthy weight, you are doing it right.

What goes in the bowl

The animal side of the menu is built on **earthworms and nightcrawlers** (the single best staple), pesticide-free **slugs and snails**, **dubia roaches** and **crickets**, with silkworms and hornworms as soft, hydrating treats and mealworms, superworms and waxworms kept occasional because they are fatty. An occasional bit of plain cooked egg adds variety. The plant side is built on **dark leafy greens**, **orange and yellow vegetables**, a little **fruit and berries** as dessert, and **store-bought mushrooms**, which box turtles famously adore. A quality commercial box turtle diet can fill gaps but should never be the whole menu. The tables below sort it all out.

Vitamin A: the food group that matters most

One of the biggest killers of captive box turtles is **hypovitaminosis A**, which is a fancy phrase for "not enough vitamin A." Vitamin A keeps the lining of the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin healthy. When a turtle gets too little, those linings change, tissues swell and block the tear ducts and ear canals, and the classic result is puffy, closed eyes and ear abscesses. It is common in turtles fed mostly lettuce, fruit, pellets or insects, and it is largely preventable.

Build vitamin A into the weekly rotation with:

- **Dark leafy greens** (collards, dandelion greens, mustard greens, turnip greens)
- **Carrot**
- **Sweet potato**
- **Winter squash** (butternut, acorn, pumpkin)
- **Red and orange bell pepper**

Aim for one or more of these in nearly every plant meal. The pigments in these foods (beta-carotene) are turned into vitamin A by the body as needed, so they are much safer than a heavy dose of vitamin A supplements, which can overdose a turtle just as easily as a deficiency can harm it.

Safe foods and never-feed foods

Food	Category	Frequency	Notes
Earthworms, nightcrawlers	Staple protein	Several times weekly	Best all-around feeder; gut-loading not needed for worms from clean bedding
Pesticide-free slugs and snails	Staple protein	Weekly or more	Excellent calcium; collect only from untreated areas
Dubia roaches	Staple protein	Several times weekly	Gut-load and dust with calcium
Crickets	Staple protein	Weekly	Gut-load first

Food	Category	Frequency	Notes
Mealworms, superworms, waxworms	Treat protein	Occasional	High fat; keep rare
Collards, dandelion greens, mustard greens, turnip greens	Staple greens	Several times weekly	High in calcium and vitamin A; the plant base
Carrot, sweet potato, squash	Vitamin A foods	2–3 times weekly	Grate or dice small; cook sweet potato lightly if it is hard
Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, melon	Fruit	A few times weekly	Small amounts; fruit is the treat portion of the plant share
Store-bought mushrooms	Treat	Occasional	Plain, washed, no seasoning
Spinach, beet greens, Swiss chard	Limit	Rare	High oxalates can bind calcium
Iceberg lettuce, romaine as a staple	Avoid as a staple	Never as a main food	Mostly water; the turtle fills up and gets almost no nutrition
Avocado	Never	Never	Toxic to reptiles
Rhubarb	Never	Never	Oxalic acid is toxic
Wild-picked mushrooms	Never	Never	Many wild species are toxic to turtles and to you, and mushroom identification errors are common
Wild-caught insects from treated or unknown areas	Never	Never	Pesticide exposure can poison a turtle quickly
Fireflies	Never	Never	Toxic to many reptiles; keep them off the menu
Dairy (milk, cheese, yogurt)	Never	Never	Turtles can't digest lactose
Processed human food (bread, chips, deli meat, sweets)	Never	Never	High in salt, sugar and additives, with no nutritional value for a turtle
Dog or cat food as a staple	Never as a staple	Not regularly	Too much fat and protein, wrong vitamin balance, links to shell overgrowth and kidney strain

Supplements

Supplements fill gaps. They don't replace a good diet.

Supplement	Schedule	Notes
Plain calcium powder (no D3)	Dust feeder insects and plant meals 2–3 times weekly for adults; 3–4 times weekly for growing juveniles	Calcium without D3 is the everyday choice when UVB is correct
Calcium with D3	Once or twice a month, or as your vet suggests	Only a backup if lighting is uncertain; too much D3 can overload the system
Reptile multivitamin	Sparingly, about every 2 to 4 weeks	Choose a formula that gets its vitamin A from beta-carotene, and ask your vet before using one regularly; over-supplementing vitamin A is a real risk

How to feed

Feed in the morning when the turtle is warm and active, or in the early evening. Use a shallow, flat dish or a smooth stone so your turtle isn't scooping substrate with its meal, drop live worms and insects into the leaf litter to make it hunt, and remove uneaten fresh food after a few hours. Juveniles get a small, protein-heavy meal daily; adults get a good-sized, half-and-half meal three to four times a week. Box turtles eat more on warm, humid days and less when it's cool or dry, so don't panic over a skipped day, but do investigate a week of not eating.

Water and hydration

Offer a **shallow, clean soaking dish** at all times, wide enough to climb into and sit in with the water no higher than the bottom edge of the shell (lower for young turtles). Box turtles are **not strong swimmers**, and a dish that's too deep is a drowning risk. Change the water daily; box turtles love to soak, drink and defecate in the same spot.

***Shop the food and supplies:** Browse Reptile & Amphibian Food and Live Feed Delivered!.*

SECTION 7

Shell, Eyes & Seasonal Care

What a healthy shell looks like

A healthy box turtle shell is **firm all the way across, smooth, and evenly colored**, with scutes that lie flat and overlap neatly. Look at your turtle once a week with the same questions:

- Is the shell hard everywhere, including the edges? No soft spots, flexing or give.
- Are the scutes lying flat? **Pyramiding** (raised, bumpy, cone-shaped growth on the scutes) is usually a sign of long-term dryness, too little humidity or an imbalanced diet.
- Are there pits, discolored patches, white fuzz or a foul smell? Those can signal shell rot.
- Do the plastron and its hinge move smoothly, with no cracks or injuries?
- Does the shell look wider and more evenly shaped as the turtle grows, with fine growth rings rather than rough, flaky patches?

Scutes shed in thin, flaky patches as the turtle grows, and a little flaking is normal. A shell that's actively peeling in thick sheets, smells bad, or shows soft, discolored areas is not.

Eye health

Box turtle eyes are clear, bright and slightly shiny, and a healthy turtle opens them fully and watches you. Check them every morning. Puffy lids, eyes held shut during the day, discharge, cloudiness, or a turtle rubbing its face with its forefeet are all warning signs. Eye trouble is most often caused by **hypovitaminosis A**, dry air, or dirty water and substrate, and it is far easier to prevent than to cure. Add vitamin A foods, check your humidity, and clean the dish. A mild case caught in the first day or two may improve with better husbandry alone, but **any swelling that doesn't clear quickly needs a vet**, and advanced cases need prescribed treatment, not home remedies.

Brumation: winter dormancy

Brumation is the reptile version of hibernation: a seasonal slowdown during which the body temperature drops, the heart rate and breathing slow, the turtle stops eating, and it spends weeks or months buried in leaf litter and soil. Wild box turtles in cold climates brumate every winter, digging into the forest floor and surviving on stored energy.

A box turtle kept **outdoors year-round** in a suitable climate with proper deep cover will naturally brumate. That is normal and healthy, as long as the pen has deep, undisturbed soil and leaf litter, drainage that doesn't leave the burrow waterlogged, and protection from predators and extreme cold. An outdoor box turtle that disappears into the leaves in November is doing exactly what it should.

For a turtle kept indoors, the safest and simplest course for most keepers is not to force brumation. Keep your turtle warm, with normal temperatures, lights and feeding, all winter, perhaps with a slightly shortened photoperiod, and let it stay active. Many indoor turtles do just fine this way.

Indoor cooling is a precise process, and getting it wrong can be fatal. If you want to try it, plan it with an **exotic veterinarian**. In general: only brumate a turtle that is healthy, well fed and at a good weight (never a sick, thin, newly acquired or recently medicated animal); get a vet exam and fecal test first; cool and re-warm **gradually over several weeks**; keep the cool environment stable, humid, protected from freezing; and check weight regularly, ending the process if the turtle loses too much or looks unwell.

If you are not sure, don't. A box turtle that stays warm and fed all winter will still live a long life. A box turtle that is cooled wrongly may not wake up.

SECTION 8

Common Challenges & Solutions

Swollen eyes (hypovitaminosis A)

What you see: puffy, swollen eyelids, eyes held closed, a crusty or cloudy film, rubbing at the face, loss of appetite. Sometimes swelling appears in the ear area too. **Why:** a diet short on vitamin A, plus dry air and dirty substrate or water that irritate already-vulnerable tissue. **What to do:** add vitamin A foods (dark greens, carrot, sweet potato, squash) at once, raise humidity, deepen the humid retreat, and clean the dish and substrate. Do not use human eye drops or home remedies. **When to call a vet:** the same day or next day for any eye that stays swollen or closed. Early treatment works well, but advanced cases can cause permanent damage.

Ear abscess

What you see: a firm, rounded swelling on one or both sides of the head behind the eye, where the ear is hidden under the skin. The lump is often solid, not soft. **Why:** an abscess of the middle ear, frequently linked to hypovitaminosis A, dirty water or dry conditions. In reptiles the pus is thick and cheesy and does not drain on its own. **What to do:** correct diet and humidity, keep the water and substrate clean, and see a vet. Do not squeeze or lance it yourself. **When to call a vet:** as soon as you see any swelling, because a reptile abscess needs surgical removal and follow-up care.

Shell rot

What you see: soft, pitted or discolored patches on the shell, white or gray fuzz, a foul smell, fluid or pus under the scutes, scutes lifting or flaking in sheets. **Why:** bacterial or fungal infection that gets in through a scrape, crack or constantly wet, dirty substrate. **What to do:** clean and dry the enclosure, replace the substrate, make sure there is a dry spot as well as a damp one, and keep the turtle clean. **When to call a vet:** any suspected shell rot. Treatment usually involves cleaning, prescription topical medication and sometimes antibiotics, and delay can let the infection reach the bone.

Respiratory infection

What you see: bubbles or mucus at the nose and mouth, wheezing, clicking or open-mouth breathing, lethargy, loss of appetite, floating or tilting when swimming. **Why:** cold temperatures, drafts, damp stagnant air, stress or poor nutrition. **What to do:** check that your basking and ambient temperatures are in range, improve ventilation, and take the turtle to a vet quickly. **When to call a vet:** immediately. Respiratory infections progress quickly in reptiles and can become pneumonia.

Metabolic bone disease (MBD)

What you see: a soft or flexible shell, a shell that is misshapen or growing unevenly, weak or shaky limbs, difficulty lifting the body off the ground, a soft or rubbery beak or jaw, and in advanced cases fractures. **Why:** a lack of usable UVB and/or calcium, so the body can't build or maintain bone. In box turtles, a worn-out UVB tube or a lamp that's too far away is the most common cause. **What to do:** confirm the UVB lamp is the right type, correctly placed and not past its replacement date, review calcium supplementation, and increase safe outdoor sun. **When to call a vet:** at the first sign of softness or weakness. Early MBD is treatable, but advanced cases can cause permanent deformities.

Internal parasites

What you see: loose, smelly or mucus-coated stool, worms in the droppings, weight loss despite eating, low energy. **Why:** parasites are common in turtles that have lived outdoors or with other animals, especially wild-caught ones. **What to do:** collect a fresh, sealed fecal sample, keep it cool, and have your vet test it. Don't use over-the-counter dewormers without a diagnosis. **When to call a vet:** whenever you see worms or have loose stool for more than a few days, plus a routine fecal check yearly.

Overgrown beak

What you see: an upper beak that curves long and hooked over the lower one, difficulty picking up food. **Why:** beaks grow continuously, and a soft diet doesn't wear them down; it can also point to nutritional problems. **What to do:** offer firmer foods and whole insects, and see a vet for a trim. Never trim it yourself. **When to call a vet:** if the beak interferes with eating or looks warped.

Dehydration

What you see: sunken eyes, dry or wrinkled skin, thick sticky saliva, dark urates, lethargy, refusing food, and a turtle that sits in the water dish constantly or won't leave it. **Why:** low humidity, no access to clean water, high temperatures, or illness. **What to do:** offer a 15 to 20 minute warm soak in shallow water, check humidity and temperatures, and make sure the water dish is clean and accessible. **When to call a vet:** if the turtle doesn't perk up within a day, or is very lethargic or sunken.

Injuries from dogs, mowers and falls

What you see: cracks or chips in the shell, bite marks, bleeding, exposed tissue, broken limbs. **Why:** box turtles are vulnerable to dog bites, lawn mowers, string trimmers and drops. **What to do:** keep the turtle quiet, warm and clean in a dry container, cover open wounds loosely with clean gauze, and head to the vet. Don't use peroxide or ointments unless your vet says so. **When to call a vet:** immediately for any crack through the shell, bleeding, or visible tissue.

Refusing food after arrival or moving

What you see: a new turtle that stays shut in its shell and won't eat for days. **Why:** stress, a new environment, temperatures out of range, or hidden illness. **What to do:** double-check temperatures, humidity and lighting, cover part of the enclosure, offer favorites like earthworms and strawberries, and give it quiet. **When to call a vet:** if it goes more than a week without eating, loses weight or shows other signs of illness.

Quick reference

What you see	Likely cause	What to do	Vet urgency
Swollen or closed eyes	Hypovitaminosis A, dry air, dirty water	Add vitamin A foods, raise humidity, clean the setup	Same or next day
Lump behind the eye or ear	Ear abscess	Improve diet and humidity; do not squeeze	Book now; needs surgery
Soft, pitted or smelly shell patches	Shell rot	Dry the enclosure, replace substrate	Book promptly
Bubbles at nose, wheezing, open-mouth breathing	Respiratory infection	Check temperatures; keep warm; no drafts	Same day
Soft shell, weak limbs, soft jaw	MBD	Fix UVB, review calcium	Within days
Loose or smelly stool, weight loss	Parasites	Fresh fecal sample	Within a week
Long, hooked beak	Overgrown beak	Offer firmer foods	Book a trim
Sunken eyes, dry skin, lethargy	Dehydration	Warm soak, fix humidity	Within a day
Cracked shell, bite marks, bleeding	Injury	Keep clean and quiet	Same day
Hiding and not eating after a move	Stress	Quiet, correct temperatures, favorite foods	After a week without eating

SECTION 9

Handling

Minimal and gentle

Think of your box turtle as an animal you **observe**, not one you hold. Handle only when you have a reason: a weekly weigh-in and health check, a soak, a cleaning, or a vet trip. When you do pick one up, use two hands and keep it low over a soft surface, because a dropped turtle can crack its shell. Hold it by the sides of the shell, never by the head or legs, and never turn it upside down. If it shuts its hinge, that is fear, not rudeness. Set it down, wait, and **never pry it open**. Keep sessions to a few minutes.

Hygiene

All reptiles can carry **Salmonella** without looking sick. Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds after every contact with the turtle or its enclosure, clean dishes and tools in a utility sink or tub (never the kitchen sink), keep the turtle out of the kitchen, and never kiss it or eat while handling it.

Children and vulnerable people

Take extra caution with **children under 5, pregnant people, and anyone with a weakened immune system** (including older adults and people on immune-suppressing medication). These groups are at higher risk of serious Salmonella illness and should not handle the turtle or touch its enclosure. Older children can enjoy watching a box turtle, but an adult should do the handling, and every child should wash up afterward. A box turtle is a wonderful animal for a family to observe together, not a toy to carry around.

SECTION 10

Routine Care Calendar

How often	What to do
Daily	Check temperatures, humidity and that the lamps came on and off on schedule
Daily	Refill the shallow water dish with fresh water; scrub if soiled
Daily	Mist the enclosure, focusing on the humid end
Daily	Spot-clean droppings and uneaten food
Daily	Feed juveniles; feed adults 3 to 4 times a week
Daily	Look over eyes, nose, shell and behavior for anything unusual
Weekly	Stir the substrate, re-dampen the humid end, and replace any soured moss
Weekly	Weigh your turtle and inspect the shell and plastron
Weekly	Scrub the water dish and hides with hot water
Monthly	Replace the top layer of substrate and refresh the leaf litter
Monthly	Check thermometers and hygrometer accuracy; inspect the enclosure for gaps or climbing hazards
Every 2–3 months	Full substrate replacement and enclosure deep clean
Every 6–12 months	Replace the UVB tube on the manufacturer's schedule
Annually	Reptile vet wellness visit with a fecal exam; measure shell length and compare with your records

SECTION 11

When to See a Vet

Box turtles hide illness well, and by the time a problem shows, it has usually been building for weeks. **When you're uncertain whether to call, call.**

Go today:

- Open-mouth breathing, wheezing, bubbles at the nose or mouth
- A cracked or punctured shell, bleeding, or exposed tissue
- Eyes swollen shut, or with discharge or cloudiness that is getting worse
- A firm lump behind the eye or ear
- Sunken eyes, limpness, or unresponsiveness
- Any prolapse (tissue sticking out of the vent)
- A female straining to lay eggs without success
- Suspected overheating or a burn

Book within a few days:

- Soft, pitted, smelly or discolored shell patches
- Soft shell or jaw, or weak limbs
- Loose stool lasting more than a few days, or visible worms
- No eating for a week or more, or noticeable weight loss
- An overgrown or hooked beak
- New swelling, lumps or sores

Find your reptile vet now. Ask whether they see turtles, and what their emergency plan is. Bring a log of temperatures, diet and weight, plus a fresh fecal sample.

SECTION 12

FAQ

What do box turtles eat?

Box turtles are omnivores, and the best diet is varied. Offer earthworms, nightcrawlers, pesticide-free slugs and snails, dubia roaches and crickets, plus dark leafy greens, carrot, sweet potato, squash, berries, melon and store-bought mushrooms. Juveniles need more animal protein and eat daily, while adults eat about half protein and half plants three to four times a week. Include vitamin A foods often, dust food with calcium, and never feed avocado, rhubarb, wild mushrooms, dairy, processed food, or dog and cat food as a staple.

How long do box turtles live?

With good care, box turtles live **40 to 50+ years**, and some live much longer, so plan on a lifelong commitment that may outlast your first caretaker. The biggest factors are correct humidity, proper UVB, a varied diet rich in vitamin A, a clean enclosure, and prompt vet care. Name a backup caretaker in your family plans and keep written care notes so your turtle can move to its next keeper without trouble.

Can I keep a wild box turtle?

No. Wild box turtle populations are declining and taking them from the wild is illegal in many states. In Pennsylvania the eastern box turtle has a possession limit of zero, so keeping a wild one is illegal there. Never relocate a wild turtle: they have strong homing instincts and a small home range, and a moved turtle often wanders until it dies. If one is crossing a road, move it a short distance in the direction it was heading. If you want a pet, check your state's rules and buy only a captive-bred animal from a reputable breeder, or adopt through a rescue; in Pennsylvania, ask the Fish and Boat Commission which box turtles you may keep.

How big should a box turtle enclosure be?

The indoor minimum for one adult is roughly **4' × 2'**, and **8' × 4'** is ideal. Floor space matters more than height, but the sides must be secure because box turtles climb. Include a hide, a shallow soaking dish, a basking spot and a deep, damp substrate area. In warm months, a secure outdoor pen of at least **8' × 4'** with shade, cover, buried walls and a predator-proof top is the best home you can offer.

Do box turtles need UVB?

Yes. Box turtles are Ferguson Zone 2–3 animals and need a real UVB source, ideally a linear tube mounted at the manufacturer's recommended distance with shade available, plus natural sunlight outdoors whenever possible. Without enough UVB, they can't process calcium and develop metabolic bone disease, with a soft, deformed shell and weak limbs. Replace the tube on schedule, because output fades long before the light looks dim, and remember that window glass blocks UVB.

What humidity do box turtles need?

Aim for **60–80%**, especially for Eastern box turtles, with an even damper humid hide. Use a deep, moisture-retaining substrate of cypress mulch, topsoil and sphagnum, mist daily and keep a shallow water dish. Dry rooms cause dehydration, pyramiding, and eye and shell trouble. Ornate box turtles tolerate somewhat drier air, but they still need a humid retreat. Check a hygrometer at turtle height every day, especially in winter.

Why are my box turtle's eyes swollen?

The most common cause is **hypovitaminosis A**, a vitamin A shortage that makes the tissues around the eyes swell, often made worse by dry air or dirty water and substrate. Start adding vitamin A foods like dark greens, carrot, sweet potato and squash, raise humidity and clean the enclosure, but don't wait to see if it goes away on its own. Swollen eyes that persist need a reptile vet

quickly, as treatment usually requires prescribed medication and early care works best.

Do box turtles hibernate?

Wild box turtles in cold climates do **brumate**, a reptile version of hibernation, burrowing into soil and leaf litter for the winter. Outdoor turtles in a proper pen with deep cover may do the same naturally. Indoor cooling is risky and takes precision, so most keepers simply keep their turtle warm and active all winter. Never brumate a sick or underweight animal, and plan any cooling with an experienced reptile vet.

Are box turtles good pets for beginners?

Honestly, not usually. They look simple, but they need steady humidity, correct lighting, a varied omnivore diet, a large enclosure and a legal, captive-bred source, and they live for decades. They are also shy and stress-prone, not cuddly. A patient beginner who researches thoroughly, builds the habitat first and finds a reptile vet can do very well, but this is a long-term commitment, not an easy starter pet.

Can box turtles live together?

Generally, it's best to keep one box turtle per enclosure. Males can fight, harass females and injure each other, and even compatible turtles can quietly compete for food and warmth. Housing turtles together also spreads disease, so any newcomer needs a quarantine of at least 90 days. If you ever keep more than one, you'll need a much larger space, plenty of hides and feeding stations, one male at most, and close daily monitoring.

Ready to shop? Start with *Reptiles & Amphibians*. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters. Not sure this is the right pet? Compare your options in our *Reptile Guide*.

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not as a checkout option, but off the top of every order, because we believe responsible pet ownership and community care are the same commitment made in two directions.

For box turtle keepers, that commitment has an extra layer. These are animals of our own Lancaster County woods, and the best thing any of us can do for them is keep the wild ones wild and give captive-bred ones a patient, well-built home. If you're ready for a decades-long friendship with a small, shy, remarkable animal, you're exactly the kind of keeper they deserve.

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