



SULCATA STATION

Switching Tortoises to a Healthier Diet

SUMMARY

Switching your tortoise to a high-fiber, grass-based diet seems challenging, but it really isn't. The process requires time and patience, as well as a certain amount of tough love on the part of the tortoise owner.

Sulcata tortoises are a lot like human children -- once they get accustomed to eating veggies and fruit, they tend to ignore the grass hay and weeds that they should be eating. Your job as the owner is to get your tortoise off the bad food and onto a healthier diet of grasses and edible weeds.

There are two ways to approach this situation:

1. The "tough-love" approach: You completely stop giving the tortoise all the "bad" stuff like lettuce, greens, veggies, and so forth. Provide only grass and/or grass hay. Eventually, when your tortoise gets hungry enough, he'll give in and eat it; **OR**
2. You gradually wean the tortoise off the produce and veggies that it likes, but which isn't good for it, and onto a better diet.

Our Technique for Stubborn Tortoises

Sulcata are native to the Sahel region of Africa, which is just south of the Sahara Desert. They are used to very meager supplies of food and can easily handle not eating for a while, if they are healthy to begin with. That is why the "tough-love" approach can work, provided that the owner isn't too soft-hearted and doesn't give in before the tortoise does.

But if you're soft-hearted, it may be easier on your conscience to change the tortoise's diet gradually. Here is how you can wean your tortoise off the greens and veggies, and onto a grass and/or grass hay-based diet:

Put several large handfuls of grass/hay into a plastic bucket. Use kitchen scissors or hedge clippers to cut it up into shorter lengths. Don't worry about making all of it the same size, just chop it up. When you're done chopping, you should have grass hay that ranges from three or four inches long all the way down to "dust particle" size. We have a specific, five-gallon plastic bucket with a tight-fitting lid that we devote strictly to keeping this chopped-up grass hay on hand.

To feed your tortoise: Pull a handful of the chopped-up grass hay from the bottom of the bucket (make sure to get some of the smaller pieces and the "dust" as well) and put it into a gallon-size ziplock plastic bag. Then add a small amount of water, a small amount of grated carrot (one-quarter of a small carrot is plenty) and a small amount of chopped-up greens (one-half of a

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Romaine leaf, or about a quarter of a collard green leaf) to the bag. If you are using a calcium supplement, you can also add a small sprinkle of it to the bag.

Zip the bag almost all the way closed, then inflate the bag as much as possible and zip it completely shut. Shake the sealed, inflated bag to dampen and mix the grass, carrots and greens (and calcium supplement) well. Let the bag sit for about ten minutes so that the smells and flavors blend.

Feed this mixture to your tortoise every other day or even every third day. [Note: this mixture does not keep very well (it tends to get moldy) so you should make it fresh every time you feed your tortoise.]

When you start this process, the mixture will be mostly greens, some carrot, and some grass. At each feeding, you gradually reduce the amount of greens and carrots, and increase the amount of grass. Over the course of about two to four weeks, you keep increasing the grass hay and reducing the greens and carrots.

Your eventual goal should be a mixture of about 75 percent hay, 20 percent greens, and 5 percent (or less) grated/chopped carrot. This is a good basic winter diet for sulcata tortoises.

Another method you can try if your tortoise still won't eat: Make this grass/greens/carrot mixture (but don't add the calcium supplement to it yet) in the morning and then let it sit until lunchtime (or for a couple of hours at room temperature). The dry grass will soak up the water and the liquid from the greens and grated carrots and rehydrate slightly. Just before you feed it to your tortoise, add the calcium supplement, then shake the ziplock bag well to mix it in thoroughly. Your tortoise might be more interested in it because everything will smell like carrots and greens.

Access to water is crucial!

While you are in the process of changing the tortoise's diet, we strongly recommend soaking him every day to make sure that he remains properly hydrated. The tortoise will need to take in more water (either by soaking or by having access to a water dish if he will drink by himself), particularly if he's going to be eating dry grass hay.

Adding treats (and supplements) back into the diet:

Once you have gotten your tortoise to eat grass hay on a regular basis, then you can add back in other food items for variety. Food items like opuntia (prickly pear) cactus pads, flowers (roses, hibiscus, nasturtium, petunias, squash flowers), leaves (grapevine, hibiscus, mulberry, nasturtium) and non-toxic, edible weeds such as dandelion, henbit, pigweed, mustard, chickweed, common mallow, etc. can be added back into the diet in small amounts, mixed with soaked grass hay.

If you want to feed your tortoise dark leafy greens like collard greens, dandelion greens, Romaine lettuce, or arugula – feed these **ONLY** in small quantities, and **ONLY** once a week as a treat. The dark leafy greens are a great way to get the tortoise to eat calcium supplements and vitamin supplements. Again, this is where ziplock bags come in very handy. (We buy these in bulk at Costco because we go through so many of them!)

Simply wash the greens and shake the excess water off well. Then tear up one or two leaves as if you were making yourself a very small salad. Put the torn-up leaves into a ziplock bag. Sprinkle a tiny bit of vitamin powder, and a slightly larger amount of calcium powder onto the greens, then zip the bag almost closed. Inflate the bag, then close it completely and shake it well. The powder will coat all the leaves more or less evenly. Give the powder-coated leaves to your tortoise. We give our sulcata tortoises a small handful of these greens, covered with calcium carbonate powder and a small amount of vitamin powder, a couple of times per month.

Do not overuse the vitamin supplements! Too much can actually be worse than too little! You only need to provide these once a week at most. However, the calcium supplement can be added to food at every other feeding.

For more information related to this topic, visit Sulcata Station's [DIET](#) page.