



SULCATA STATION

Fall and Winter Feeding Recommendations

SUMMARY

Feeding large tortoises can be tough enough during the spring and summer, but when fall and winter roll around, it can become even more challenging. (Remember: sulcata tortoises do NOT hibernate, so you must provide food year around for your tortoise.)

If you live in the southwestern or southern parts of the USA or Europe, you are fortunate because your sulcata tortoises should be able to go outside and graze almost year-around. However, if you live in areas with snowy and/or wet, cold winters, you must plan in advance how you are going to feed your “shelled eating machine” during the wintertime when it cannot go outdoors to graze.

Basically, you have two choices for feeding your sulcata tortoise during the winter:

1. You can grow a variety of grasses and weeds indoors in pots or other containers; OR
2. You can buy grass hay and use it as the main staple for your tortoise.

Either way, you should keep feeding your tortoise a high percentage of grass, along with small amounts of dark leafy greens, throughout the winter, or for as long as your tortoise cannot go outdoors and graze on its own.

Container Planting - Growing Graze Indoors:

If you want to plant and grow a variety of grasses for your sulcata, we recommend buying a “Pasture Mix” designed for horses from a reputable seed supplier. There are several online sources for pasture mixes that should be good for grazing tortoises:

Peaceful Valley Organic Farm Supply’s Bloat Resist Pasture Mix:

http://groworganic.com/item_SPI200_Bloat_Resist_Pasture_Mix_Irrigat.html

Peaceful Valley Organic Farm Supply’s Premium Horse Pasture Mix:

http://groworganic.com/item_SPI600_Premium_Horse_Pasture_Mix_Irriga.html

Emerald Seed & Supply's Royal Horse Pasture Mix

http://www.emeraldseedandsupply.com/seed/grass_pasture.html

Emerald Seed & Supply’s Dryland Pasture Mix:

http://www.emeraldseedandsupply.com/wildlife/dryland_pasture_mix.html

Whichever pasture grass mix you purchase, you will need to plant and grow the mixture in several different containers to provide enough grass on a regular basis for your tortoise. Let the

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grasses grow to at least three or four inches in height. After you harvest grass from one container, leave it alone until it grows back, and harvest from your other containers in sequence. Hopefully, your first container will have re-grown back to harvestable height by the time you come back to it.

Grass Hay - The Easier Way to Feed During Winter

Let's face it: unless you have lots of space and time to grow grasses in indoor containers, grass hay is a much simpler way to feed your tortoise through the winter.

Grass hay is usually composed of a variety of different grasses and some edible weeds, and is sold at feed stores that carry horse supplies. A great source for high-quality grass hay in manageable sizes is the Oxbow Hay Company at <http://www.oxbowhay.com>. They sell Orchard Grass hay, which is what most owners recommend feeding to sulcata tortoises. Oxbow Hay will ship all over the US and Canada via UPS.

How To Use Grass Hay

1. Free Choice Feeding: You can break up a hay bale and spread the hay around the tortoise's yard or enclosure so that it can eat the hay as desired. Pile some of the hay into the corners of the tortoise's enclosure so that it can burrow down at night for shelter. Remove any hay that the tortoise pees or poops on. Put more hay into the enclosure as the tortoise eats it.

2. Dampened or Soaked Hay: If your tortoise refuses to eat dry hay, try misting or spraying it with water. This increases the "grassy" smell and may tempt the tortoise into eating. You can also try soaking hay in a bucket of warm water for ten minutes, then giving the drained, wet hay to your tortoise.

During the winter at Sulcata Station, we pack dry grass hay into a five-gallon plastic bucket, cut it up using hedge clippers, then fill the bucket with enough hot tap water to cover the hay. We let this sit for 15 to 20 minutes before offering it to our tortoises atop their existing dry grass hay. The soaking rehydrates the grass hay and brings out its aroma, which seems to perk up the tortoises' appetite for it. After they finish the damp grass hay, they'll usually go on to eat the surrounding dry grass hay as well.

3. Use Hay to Coat Dark Leafy Greens: If you are in the process of switching your tortoise to a healthier, grass-based diet, you can use finely chopped grass hay to coat dark leafy greens to increase the fiber and nutrient content of the greens.

To do this: Pull out several large handfuls of hay and put them into a five-gallon plastic bucket. Then use scissors or hedge clippers to cut the hay into shorter lengths (The smaller your tortoise,

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the shorter you should cut the hay). Transfer all the chopped-up hay (even the microfine particles and dust) into a gallon-size plastic ziplock bag.

Whenever you feed dark, leafy greens (one good mix is to use dandelion greens, collard greens, Romaine lettuce, and arugula) to your tortoise, wash the greens well and shake off the excess water. Then put them into a plastic ziplock bag and add a couple of handfuls of the chopped-up grass hay (try to get various length of the hay and even some of the hay dust). Zip the bag shut and shake well. The end result is grass-covered greens that can help your tortoise get sufficient fiber in its diet. (This same technique is also great for getting calcium and vitamin supplement powders onto food.)

While you are feeding hay to your tortoise, make sure that you provide fresh, clean water at all times for your tortoise to drink. Sulcata are very good at extracting water from any fresh grasses and leafy greens they eat, but there is little to no extractable water available from dry grass hay.

A shallow plastic plant saucer works well as a water bowl for smaller tortoises. For larger tortoises, you can use a concrete mixing tub or a shallow plastic storage box as a water bowl. Make sure that the water bowl is easy for the tortoise to drink from, and shallow enough that your tortoise won't drown if he decides to climb into it for a good soak.

Tortoises are notorious for pooping in their water bowls. It's just a fact of tortoise life. Make sure you clean and refill the water bowl regularly -- especially after your tortoise poops in it.

You say your tortoise won't eat grass hay? For suggestions on how to wean your tortoise off of produce and onto grass hay, download our document on [getting tortoises to switch to grass hay](#).