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TURTLES IN THE HOME AQUARIUM

The young of many varieties of American fresh-water turtles are popular as pets in home aquariums. Thousands of baby turtles are sold annually by pet shops located in large cities. Space for keeping live animals in the home is usually limited, but baby turtles are fortunately noiseless and odorless, and they need only a small space for their living quarters. Food need not be given on a time schedule, so the family can plan vacations which do not include the pet turtle. Baby turtles soon learn to associate the presence of their keeper with food at certain times. Turtle fanciers insist that their pets possess distinctive personalities. Adults and children alike find pet turtles a source of considerable pleasure.

VARIETIES: Most young turtles come from the southern States, especially Louisiana, where collectors capture the baby turtles in the wild or secure the eggs and re-bury them in pens until hatching occurs. There are more than 60 varieties of turtles in the United States, but most baby turtles reaching the market belong to only a few species: the map turtles (Graptemys), which generally have a brown shell with a black ridge, and the sliders or red-ears (Pseudemys) which have a green shell and an elongate red bar on both sides of the head. Other types often available for fanciers are the northern and southern painted turtles, snapping turtles, soft-shelled turtles, and many variations of the genus Pseudemys. Occasionally young turtles are sold at fairs and elsewhere with their shells decorated with painted designs. This is a most unfortunate practice, as the shell of such a maltreated specimen will be unable to grow normally, and the turtle may eventually die. The turtle can be rescued by removing the paint, a chip at a time, with the tip of a knife blade, but the use of paint removers for this purpose is discouraged as they are often injurious.

ENVIRONMENT IN HOME: Young turtles should be provided with fresh clean water at least several inches deep and a dry landing place upon which to crawl and become thoroughly dry from time to time. A 1-gallon aquarium will hold two small turtles, but the larger the aquarium, the greater the activity, rapidity of growth, and future well-being of the turtles. A deep enamel or glass dish provided with water and sand will make a suitable and cheap turtle tank. Containers should be small enough that they can be readily rinsed and cleaned after feeding the turtles. It is not recommended that turtles be kept

in an aquarium with goldfish or tropical fish unless the owner does not mind losing a few fish--they serve as excellent food for turtles. Turtles of different varieties may usually be placed together in safety, provided they are all of nearly the same size.

WARMTH: Turtles belong to the class of "cold-blooded" vertebrates, which have a normal body temperature corresponding to that of their environment. Because of this, baby turtles must be kept warm at all times if they are to grow and live well in confinement. Water and air temperatures should not be permitted to fall below 75° F., and preferably the temperature should range from 80° to 90° F. Turtles will not feed at low temperatures. Generally, a temperature of about 75° or a little less is maintained in homes during the winter and turtles are often chilled so that they refuse all food and eventually die of starvation. When necessary, additional warmth can be provided by hanging over the aquarium a 40- or 60-watt electric bulb with metal reflector. The temperature should be checked to prevent overheating of the water in the aquarium. A sunny window away from cold drafts is a welcome spot for a baby turtle, but the temperature should be watched to prevent overheating by the sun's rays, especially in the summer.

FOOD: Most water turtles are carnivorous; they prefer a diet of lean raw meat, raw fish, and earthworms. Dried and prepared foods such as ant eggs, which are often sold in pet stores, are not adequate to maintain good health when exclusively used. Earthworms cut into small pieces and liver cut into narrow strips are very effective in getting young turtles to begin feeding. Few baby turtles have a meal prior to their sale as pets. Whole cut-up minnows or market fish will give variety to the diet. Lettuce, tomatoes, and strawberries may be fed to baby turtles although they do not seem to especially care for vegetable foods when young. Feeding twice a week should be sufficient when adequate temperature is maintained. To encourage easy feeding, all food should be cut into hamburger size or slender strips. Most turtles feed under water, accordingly food should be placed in the water. All uneaten food should be removed from the aquarium before decomposition. When a turtle's appetite seems to be lacking, a small pinch of salt in the water may revive it. Sliced raw shrimp is also a good food for the finicky eater.

AILMENTS: Lacking warm quarters and proper fresh foods, many baby turtles refuse to feed and eventually die of malnutrition. Sunlight may serve to correct certain deficiencies in the diet. If kept warm and fed raw liver, raw fresh fish, and earthworms, most baby turtles may be expected to remain in good health over a period of years.

Sick turtles seldom regain normal health, especially if malnutrition is well advanced. Sore or closed eyelides, often induced by starvation and chilling, may be helped by placing a drop of 2% mercurochrome on each eye and keeping the turtle in a moist warm tank. A few drops of cod-liver oil placed in the turtle's mouth by means of a medicine dropper, once every two weeks, are highly beneficial to their health.

A couple of pennies, or better yet, a small piece of copper screen placed in the bottom of a turtle tank will help keep the turtles free from the various kinds of fungus infections that sometimes cause sore spots on the skin.

SUGGESTED READING

- Pope, Clifford H. 1949. Turtles of the United States and Canada. 343 pp. illust. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, N. Y.
- Carr, Archie. 1952. Handbook of Turtles. 542 pp. illust. Comstock Publishing Associates, Ithaca, N. Y.
- Conant, Roger. 1958. A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of the United States and Canada east of 100th Meridian. 366 pp. illust. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.