



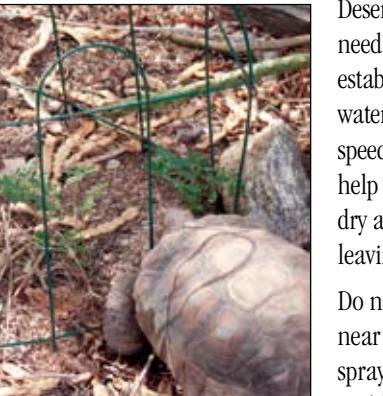
The best way to keep captive animals healthy is to mimic their natural environment.

By landscaping your tortoise habitat to mimic the Sonoran Desert, you will allow your tortoise to follow its instincts, season to season, in meeting its nutritional needs.

Many nonnative landscape plants are invasive in our desert. These invaders are threatening wild tortoises by crowding out their favorite plants and fueling intense fires that tortoises and native desert plants cannot survive.

Getting Started

The key to a successful natural tortoise habitat is space. We recommend at least 324 square feet (approx. 18 ft by 18 ft). You will need enough room to try a variety of food plants as your tortoise teaches you which plants it prefers at different times of the year. As you learn which plants it likes best, you will need to plant enough of them to keep up with its appetite. Choose the fastest growing plants for most of your plantings. These plants will adapt well and stand up to frequent browsing. It's also a good idea to plant a selection of your tortoise's favorite plants in an area the tortoise cannot access so you always have a backup food source. Avoid using herbicides and pesticides in your yard so you can offer clippings and weeded plants to your tortoise.



Use temporary barriers to let plants rest or get established

Nutritional Needs

Native grasses are higher in fiber than most leafy plants and an important part of an adult tortoise diet. Younger tortoises need the extra proteins available from leafy plants.

Plant Care

New plants should be protected from your tortoise for several weeks while they become established. Try planting in the fall after your tortoise has stopped eating for the winter. The fall is also the best time to sow spring wildflower seeds such as lupine and penstemon.



Snapdragon Vine

Desert adapted plants need little water once established, but regular watering will greatly speed growth. A drip system will help you keep the habitat surface dry and eliminate the chance of leaving the hose running.

Do not use chemical pesticides near tortoises. Most insects can be sprayed off with a hose. Caterpillars and leaf cutter ants can strip a plant of its leaves but most hardy

Where to Get Native Plants

- Check aznps.org and click on Sources for Native Plants
- Buy native seeds or collect them from your friends
- Ask for native plants at your favorite plant retailer
- Transplant volunteer plants from around your yard



Summer rains trigger fresh, succulent, annuals to sprout. Many of these unwanted "weeds" are native plants that make excellent tortoise food like the needle grama grass and spiderling pictured here.

plants will rapidly grow back. Native plants generally do not need to be fertilized. If fertilizers are necessary, use only soil applied water soluble fertilizers.

Larger plants can be pruned down occasionally to encourage new growth within reach of the tortoise. Sprawling plants and vines can be planted in planters around the outside of the enclosure allowing the tortoise to feed on the dangling branches while keeping the rest of the plant out of reach. Slower growing plants can be protected with a wire cage so the tortoise can eat the branches as they grow out but will not be able to munch it to the ground.

Protection of Desert Tortoises and Native Plants

Both desert tortoises and Arizona native plants are protected in the wild. It is illegal to remove native plants or tortoises from the wild. Tortoises should never be handled in the wild unless it is to move them off a road. A handled tortoise will often urinate, losing much of its stored water, compromising its ability to survive until the next rainstorm.

Resources

Visit the native plants for desert tortoises demonstration garden at the Arizona Game and Fish Department Region V office in Tucson 555 N. Greasewood St.

Plants of Arizona by Anne Orth Epple

The Sonoran Desert Tortoise: Natural History, Biology and Conservation

Edited by Tom Van Devender

Native Plants for Southwestern Landscapes by Judy Mielke

Desert Tortoise Adoption Program

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

www.desertmuseum.org/programs/tap.php

Care of Captive Desert Tortoise

Arizona Game and Fish Department

www.azgfd.gov/tortoise

The Wildlife-friendly Garden

Arizona Game and Fish Department

www.azgfd.gov/w_c/landscaping_wildlife_garden.shtml

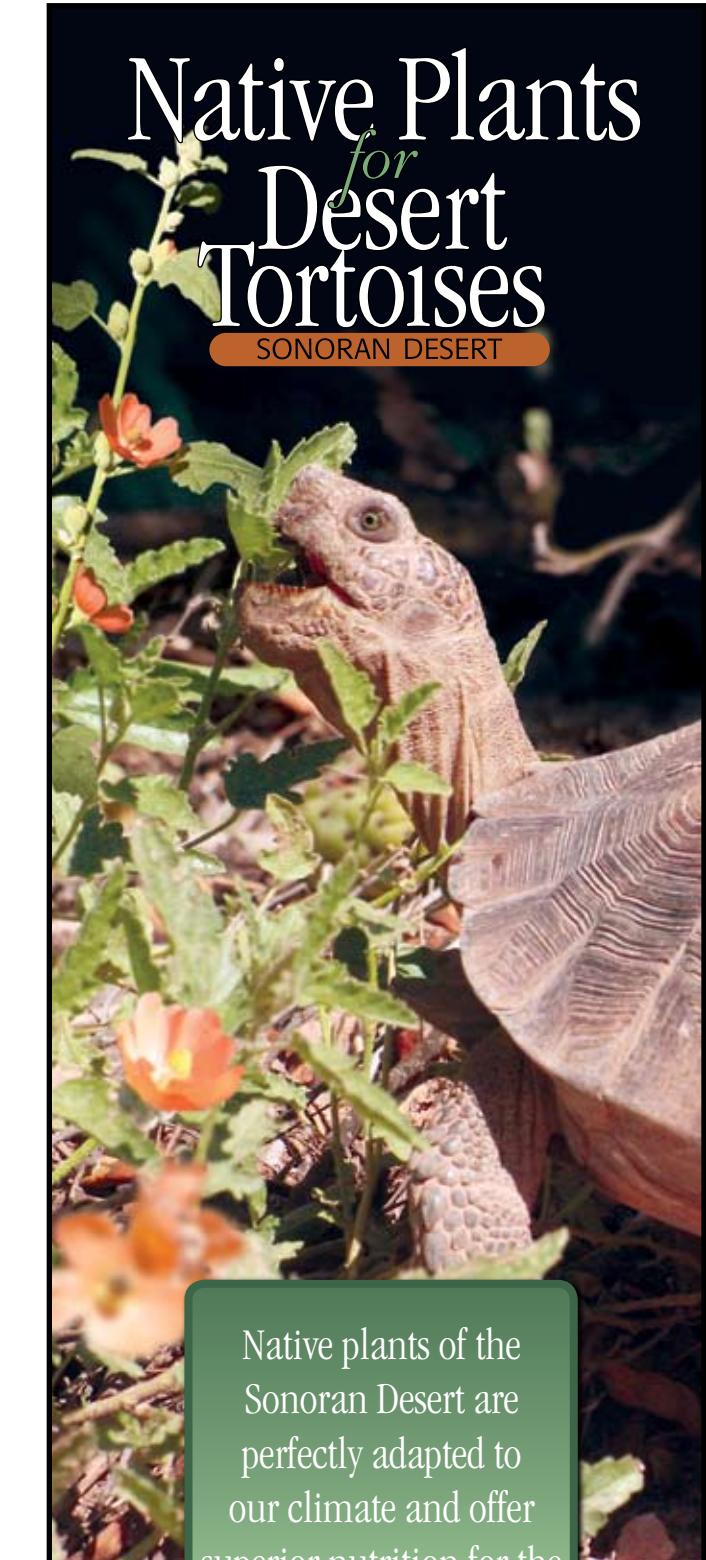
Answering Questions about Desert Tortoises

www.deserttortoise.org/answeringquestions/chapter1.html

AZ Native Plant Society www.aznps.org



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Native plants of the Sonoran Desert are perfectly adapted to our climate and offer superior nutrition for the captive desert tortoise.

