

TURTLES CAN MAKE GREAT PETS, BUT DO YOUR HOMEWORK FIRST



Photo shows two Russian Tortoises in Galloway, NJ. — AP photos



Photo shows a Western Hermann's tortoise from Apulia, Italy after a rain showing its bright coloration in Galloway, NJ.

While turtles might seem like the perfect pet - less work than dogs and cats, more interactive than fish - there are a few things to keep in mind before buying one.

"They are definitely becoming more popular as pets. Some of them are very beautiful and they can be easily purchased over the internet. But there's no such thing as an easy pet," says Katrina Smith, adoptions coordinator for the Maryland-based Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society.

Consider the source

First, never take a wild turtle as a pet. "Chances are they won't do well in captivity,"

Smith says. "Look into adopting a turtle from your local turtle society or www.petfinder.com before buying one. And if you do buy, make absolutely sure it's been born in captivity."

The cute, tiny turtles often found at tourist shops across the country may be hard to resist, but turtle experts say you should. "Don't buy those tiny turtles you see for sale in Chinatown in New York, or in tourist shops in Daytona Beach on spring break," Smith says. "They're being sold illegally."

Some states, like New Jersey, require permits for pet turtles, largely due to concerns about already stressed populations of native turtles, Smith says. Be sure to check local laws before

deciding what kind of turtle to adopt, Smith says.

Health and safety

Because many turtles carry salmonella, young children, the elderly, pregnant women and others at risk should avoid contact with turtles or be extra careful to wash their hands thoroughly after touching them. Connected to this risk, federal law prohibits selling turtles less than 4 inches in size because of the risk of children putting them in their mouths.

Dave Pauli, a senior adviser for wildlife response and policy for the Humane Society of the United States, runs a large turtle and tortoise rescue and rehabilitation center in Billings, Montana.

He stresses the importance of "good hygiene protocol" when taking a turtle into a home. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urge people to treat all turtles as if they are contaminated with salmonella, because they probably are. Wash hands thoroughly after touching turtles, their cages or their feces, and do not touch your face, other people, or any surface until your hands have been washed. Also, turtles should be kept separate from food and kept away with people at high risk of infection, the center advises.



Photo shows a head close-up of a Russian Tortoise.

Picking the right variety

Some turtles that start out small can grow to the size of a garbage can lid, so do your homework ahead of time when selecting a type and gender of turtle to call your own. In many species, females grow to be much larger than their male counterparts, Smith says. The best varieties for beginners are male painted turtles, US mud and musk turtles, and male red-eared sliders, she says.

Caring for your animal

"Turtles require more maintenance and space than most people generally assume," Pauli says, "and they live for decades, so buyers should be aware that they are a pet that may well outlive them." Turtles require a varied and sometime messy diet, room to roam in an aquarium and strict temperature control. Their habitat needs to be cleaned more often than many people realize, although water turtles require less maintenance than box turtle or other varieties.



Photo shows a baby Sulcata turtle on top of a young adult sulcata.