



Painted Turtles

Chrysemys picta

BEGINNER · 5–10 IN ADULT · 20–30 YR LIFESPAN · AQUATIC · DIURNAL BASKER · NORTH AMERICA

The turtle on the log is usually this one. Painted turtles are North America's most widespread native turtle, trim and hardy, painted along every shell margin in red and yellow. As pets they're the honest alternative to a red-eared slider: similar care in a smaller package. The real work is water, not the turtle; give them a big filtered tank and a hot basking dock, and they're famously undemanding for decades.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Adult size	5–10 in (females larger)
Lifespan	20–30 years
Water temp	72–78 °F
Basking spot	85–90 °F
Night temp	65–72 °F
UVB	Required: 12% T5 HO at 12 in
Diet	Pellets, insects, greens, fish
Feeding cadence	Juv. daily; adults every other day



Red-and-yellow trim on an olive shell: the field mark of North America's favorite pond turtle, and a regular at NARBC show tables.

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01

Look, Don't Lift

Alert, busy, and quick to learn who brings food, painted turtles are display animals and good at it. What they are not is a pet to hold. Out of water they feel like prey and act like it: they'll claw, thrash, and eventually learn to fear you. Handle for tank maintenance and health checks only, keep sessions short, and wash your hands afterward. That's standard practice with any aquatic turtle.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Swimming room is measured in footprint, not height. A long, wide tank beats a tall one every time. The working rule is 10 gallons of water per inch of shell, which is why a grown painted turtle ends up in a 72-inch tank, a stock tank, or a backyard pond. This species is hardy and cold-tolerant enough for outdoor ponds in temperate climates. House one turtle per tank as the default; extras multiply the space, the filtration, and the squabbling.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	20×12×12	30×12×12	Strong UVB from day one; basking spot at 90 °F.
Juvenile	36×18×18	48×18×18	Runs slightly smaller than a slider at maturity.
Subadult	48×18×18	60×24×24	Hardy and notably cold-tolerant.
Adult	72×24×24	Stock tank or pond	Figure 10 gallons per inch of shell; outdoor ponds work in temperate climates.

Minimum and preferred enclosure sizes (inches) from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Horizontal footprint matters more than height at every stage.

03

Heat, Light & UVB

Recreate the sunny log. Water sits at 72–78 °F, the basking spot above the dock at 85–90 °F, and nights can drift to 65–72 °F. Basking is how painted turtles build the vitamin D3 that hardens shell and bone, so UVB is required, not optional. Mount a 12% T5 HO tube with the heat lamp above the screen, 12 in over a dock that dries the whole shell, never closer than 10 in. Glass blocks UVB completely and mesh costs a quarter to a half. Run both on one timer and replace tubes before they fade out.

04

Water Quality & Filtration

Here is the part that decides whether turtle-keeping is easy or miserable: **dirty water is the root of most captive turtle illness**. Turtles eat, digest, and defecate in the same water they live in, so buy the biggest canister filter you can and oversize it without apology. Back it up with regular partial water changes and a dechlorinator. Feeding in a separate tub, or scooping leftovers promptly, cuts the waste load dramatically.

05

Substrate, Plants & Enrichment

Keep the bottom simple: bare glass or rock too large to swallow. Pea gravel is an impaction risk for a turtle that bites first and asks later, so skip it. Furnish with driftwood, slate, and a ramped dock that's easy to climb even when the turtle is tired. Live plants are enrichment and salad in one; choose edible species and expect them to be eaten. A painted turtle that patrols, forages, and basks in rotation is a turtle with enough to do.

06

Feeding an Omnivore

Painted turtles are true omnivores: a quality pellet as the staple, rotated with insects, fish, and leafy greens. Feed juveniles daily and adults every other day. Youngsters lean carnivorous; adults drift toward greens, so keep offering them even when they're ignored. This species can't swallow on land. Everything is eaten in the water, which is one more argument for that oversized filter. And don't let the begging fool you: a painted turtle will always act starving. Portion, don't pour.

07

Health Red Flags

Learn the look of a healthy shell (hard, smooth, faintly glossy) and inspect it monthly. Soft spots, pitting, or smelly patches are shell rot. Swollen, stuck-shut eyes point to poor water or diet. A turtle swimming lopsided or listing likely has a respiratory infection, and bubbles from the nose or open-mouth breathing confirm it. Any of these earns a reptile-vet visit, not a forum thread. Test the water the same day; the tank is usually the accomplice.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual - when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.