

Bedding Products for Box Turtles

There are many beddings or substrates sold for housing box turtles indoors. Most of those sold in pet stores as well as a few at plant nurseries are not appropriate. Some of the ones sold in pet stores even include a picture of a turtle or tortoise on the package. This does not make them necessarily suitable or safe. There is no “official body” of experts that controls or offers a reliable “seal of approval” on what is sold for pet reptiles.

- pine or aspen (nuggets/chips/flakes/shredded) – Pine and aspen are sold as pet bedding; pine is also sold for garden use. Both do not hold moisture, are hard for a turtle to dig in, and most importantly, can be incidentally ingested, causing a life-threatening GI tract obstruction. Box turtles can ingest surprisingly LARGE objects. Feeding a turtle on a large plate or tile will not eliminate this hazard. They are prone to walking around with food in their mouth before dropping it and eating it.
- cedar – Cedar contains aromatics that are irritating to the mucosal lining of the airways, mouth, and eyes.
- cypress mulch – Cypress mulch is sold for garden use as well as for pet chelonians (e.g. Zoo Med’s “Forest Floor”). Box turtles cannot effectively dig in it, it doesn’t hold moisture well at the surface, and it usually contains shards that might be ingested. It is a good substrate for some species of tortoises that are powerful diggers.
- coconut coir pith or fiber – If this product is allowed to dry out, it becomes dusty and sticks to any moist surface, including a turtle’s eyes, nose, and mouth. When wet, it tends to pack down. You can mix it with sphagnum moss to create an adequate substrate that is less expensive than pure sphagnum, but be sure to keep it moist at all times.
- paper products – These products are inappropriate for box turtles. Paper molds and compacts if wet; it is unacceptably dry if kept dry. A box turtle in such a dry substrate could have difficulty maintaining its water balance, its skin would be abnormally dry (eventually splitting and creating sores), and its respiratory tract and eyes would be irritated. The shell of a growing box turtle deforms if kept dry regardless of diet or lighting (access to UVB).
- sand and gravel – These products are inappropriate for box turtles. They do not hold water, are not friable, and are hard on the keratinized surface of the shell. Box turtles readily consume sand and gravel that sticks to their food, which can cause dangerous impactions.

Shredded hardwood mulch that is well aged and finely ground, and free of dyes or other chemical additives is a good indoor substrate for box turtles. The following brands are excellent:

- Country Boy Hardwood Mulch
- ICBIN (“I can’t believe it’s not” licorice root)
- Stauffers of Kissel Hill Premium Mulch



Stauffers Premium Mulch



Sphagnum Moss

Long strand golden sphagnum moss, often sold as “Orchid Moss,” is an excellent indoor substrate for box turtles. It holds moisture well, is friable even for hatchlings, and has some anti-fungal, anti-bacterial qualities due to its low pH. The two downsides of moss are: (1) if there is a trail of moss strands leading into a water dish, the moss will wick water out of the dish; (2) moss is expensive. It can be purchased online in bulk at considerably lower cost than in stores.