

Feeding North American Box Turtles

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Box Turtles are omnivores, with about half their diet plant-based and half animal-based. The balanced diet presented here has been fed to dozens of box turtles with great success over several decades. Not all turtles take to it immediately, but generally accept it within several meals. Be patient and *stick to the specific products mentioned*. There are lots of commercially prepared foods available for box turtles, but many of them fall short nutritionally. Some supplements sold are downright dangerous. So once again, stick to the products mentioned. Also, buy a small, inexpensive digital scale that can register grams. It is helpful in your understanding the amount of food to serve, and can also be used to track the weight of your turtle. Changes in weight can better reveal how well your turtle is actually eating and may suggest if there is an underlying health issue. Weight history (ideally in grams, not ounces) is one of the first things you vet will want to know.

For guidance in feeding hatchling box turtles, please see “[Care of hatchling and Young Juvenile Box Turtles](#)” at boxturtlefacts.org.

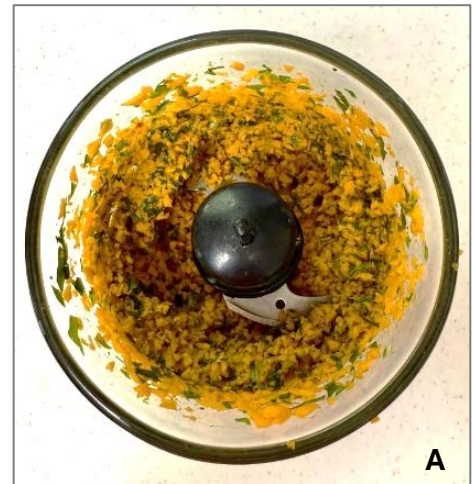
I. INGREDIENTS

1. Commercial Pelletized Chow
 - a. [Mazuri Aquatic Turtle Diet](#) is the better choice of the two recommended here in that it requires no vitamin supplementation). However, some turtles do not initially eat it well. If your turtle refuses it repeatedly consider combining it with [Omega One Adult Turtle Sticks](#), a healthy chow most turtles find attractive but requires vitamin supplementation. Then, if possible, slowly wean your turtle off Omega so you are only using Mazuri.
2. Mineral/Vitamin Supplementation
 - a. Plain calcium carbonate with no Vitamin D₃ and no phosphorus (the author’s choice is [ZooMed Repti Calcium](#) for its ultra fine grind; it sticks well to food)
 - b. [Rep-Cal Herptivite](#): Use only this brand PLEASE. Some brands include pre-formed Vitamin A which can be dangerous if overdone. Rep-Cal uses only beta carotene as a source of Vitamin A (no pre-formed Vitamin A), which is much safer. Only use the vitamin supplement if feeding Omega One as 75% or more of the chow component of the diet.
3. Produce (**BOLDED UPPERCASE** produce are the author’s primary choices)
 - a. Vegetables: **BUTTERNUT SQUASH**, carrots, pumpkin, sweet potatoes (high beta carotene veggies); avoid legumes
 - b. Greens: arugula, collard greens, curly endive, escarole, **DANDELIONS**; (sweet lettuces such as green and red leaf and romaine are OK, but less desirable than bitter greens due to the lower fiber content and poorer calcium to phosphorus ratio of the sweet lettuces); DO NOT feed iceberg, chard, kale, spinach, or spring mix.

4. Fruit: apples, berries, (e.g., **BLACKBERRIES**, **BLUEBERRIES**, gooseberries, serviceberries, raspberries, strawberries), **cantaloupe**, **PAPAYA**, stone fruit with pit removed (e.g. peaches, apricots, plums. Note: turtles are able to swallow really BIG pits but can die trying to pass them along their GI tract, so remove the pits!!); DO NOT feed bananas or citrus fruit, rarely tomatoes.

II. PREPARATION OF CHOW/VEGGIE-MIX MEALS (the recipe makes up enough for several meals)

1. Mix one level tablespoon of dry **Mazuri Aquatic Turtle Diet** or **Omega One Adult Turtle Sticks** with one teaspoon of tap water in a small container that has a flat bottom. (If you want to prepare more or less, just maintain a 3:1 ratio of chow to water.) **IMPORTANT**: Be sure the chow sits in a single layer in the soaking container so the water evenly distributes over all of the chow. Allow the chow to sit at room temperature, covered, for around 15-20 minutes; the chow will become pillowy soft but not mushy. NEVER SERVE CHOW un-hydrated.
2. Peel (if using sweet potatoes or a hard squash) and cut up about 2 tablespoons (around 25g) of vegetable; discard the peel.
3. Using a mini food processor, finely grind up but **DO NOT PUREE** the vegetable with a generous handful of greens. It is not possible to provide a specific weight or volume for the greens; it varies with the green used and how much stem is included. The mix should look like Picture A when properly processed in the right proportions. (Not; Some turtles are not attracted to greens, but consume them inadvertently when they stick to the vegetable, so grind the mix well.)
4. Hand-combine the hydrated chow with an equal volume of veggie-mix; DO NOT USE A FOOD PROCESSOR or you will make a brown goo that most turtles *will not eat*. Discard any excess veggie-mix.
5. For an adult box turtle, put a heaping $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon of the chow/veggie-mix in the turtle's serving dish. Feed less to younger turtles (around a half teaspoon for very young juveniles, which you increase as the turtle grows). Be cautious about overfeeding, especially with indoor turtles that get little exercise. Overeating may result in fatty liver disease and other health issues.
6. Add a piece of fruit equivalent in volume to about 1 large blueberry.
7. Use a tea strainer to tap out an even, light layer of the appropriate powdered supplement over the entire surface of the meal. It should look like Picture B when dusted.
 - (a) MINERAL SUPPLEMENT: If feeding Mazuri and/or Omega One, lightly dust every chow meal with plain calcium carbonate (NO Vit D₃ added in).
 - (b) VITAMIN SUPPLEMENT:
 1. If feeding Mazuri: Do NOT add any vitamin supplement
 2. If feeding Omega One as 75% or more of the chow component, lightly dust every other meal with Rep-Cal Herptivite in addition to plain calcium carbonate.



8. Keep any unused portion of chow/veggie-mix in a sealed container in the fridge. Toss it out after 2-3 days. All food should be served at room temperature. *Never serve it chilled.*

III. SCHEDULE OF MEALS

Every other day: Feed the chow/veggie-mix with fruit as described above. If the turtle tends to eat the fruit and walk away from the chow/veggie portion of the meal or eats little of it, withhold the fruit until AFTER the turtle eats the chow/veggie portion, or offer the fruit the next day.

Twice a month: substitute a chow meal with several Canadian nightcrawlers (available in the sporting goods section of super Walmart stores, and in bait stores, Petco and PetSmart); DO NOT substitute red wigglers (compost worms) for nightcrawlers; they aren't nutritionally equivalent. Wet the ground before feeding nightcrawlers since dry dirt more easily clings to nightcrawlers. Feed up to 6 nightcrawlers per turtle per month, not more due to their high iron content. If you cannot feed nightcrawlers, feed the chow/veggie-mix with fruit.

Twice a month, substitute a chow meal with one frozen-thawed pinkie mouse. Thaw in room-temperature water for around 5 minutes, pat dry, and very lightly dust with plain calcium carbonate. Serve right away. Turtles generally eat the entire mouse pup.

Optional: Once a week in-between the other feed days, offer one gut-loaded adult Dubia roach or two small juvenile Dubia roaches that have been gut-loaded (see Section VI) and lightly dusted with calcium carbonate; stop offering roaches, or downsize the offering if the turtle does not eat its chow/veggie-mix meals well during the warm summer months. Roaches are eagerly eaten by most box turtles, and some turtles will hold out for this treat. Also, if your turtle puts on excessive weight, discontinue the roach treat.

Seasonal Considerations Outdoors: In the Fall, DO NOT stop feeding your turtle until it decides to stop eating. It will automatically stop eating when it gets cold enough before the it enters brumation (hibernation).

In March/April and in late October/November your turtle may be active even though the weather is chilly. Since appetite in reptiles is temperature dependent, your turtle may have a reduced appetite at these times. If the turtle steadfastly won't eat chow meals, feed several gut-loaded Dubia roaches plus fruit in place of the chow meal, but otherwise continue with the above schedule for worms and pinkies. *NOTE: While your turtle may be enthusiastic about eating roaches, pinkies, and earthworms, you cannot sustain a healthy turtle on a diet consisting primarily of these items for months on end. Strictly follow the schedule for feeding pinkies and earthworms, and reserve the use of roaches as a chow meal replacement for that limited time of the year when it's cold and your turtle's appetite is poor. If your turtle will eat chow in cold weather, PLEASE feed him that to best ensure your pet is getting the highest level of nutrition!*

IV. DRY CHOW STORAGE

Divide the contents of the chow you have just purchased into small, 1-cup Ziplock baggies. Store the baggies in a lidded, light-proof container in the fridge. Discard any unused chow after nine months no matter what the expiration date on the label says, period! Some of the vitamin content of the chow will have degraded.

V. CUTTLEBONE

For very young box turtles, keep pieces of cuttlebone (sold for birds) in their habitat to nibble on *ad lib*. Replace as the pieces are eaten. But - VERY IMPORTANT - before offering the cuttlebone, remove and discard the stiff translucent backing. A single-edge razor blade works well for removing the backing. Also, soaking the cuttlebone in water for a couple of hours may help to make it easier to slice off the backing. It's indigestible and can cause gastro-intestinal obstruction or other damage if consumed.

For box turtles more than a few years old, consider offering pieces of plain (not flavored) [E-Cuttlebone](#) by Penn-Plax instead of cuttlebone. E-Cuttlebone has no backing and can be put directly into the habitat. The only reason not to offer them to very young turtles, is that the product can be a bit hard for a tiny beak to bit into than is the case with real cuttlebone.

DO NOT offer chicken or cow bones to turtles to munch on. Uncooked bones can harbor pathogens. Cooked bones splinter and may harm a turtle. Stay safe with cuttlebone and E-cuttlebone.



VI. GUT-LOADING DUBIA ROACHES

Roaches, like other insects, are naturally low in calcium and contain more phosphorus than calcium. To make roaches a healthy turtle food, the insects must eat a special diet that increases their calcium content.

1. Feed roaches [Mazuri Better Bug Gut-loading Diet](#) (available on Amazon & at Petco) for at least 48 hrs before they are fed to turtles. IMPORTANT - DO NOT offer any other food.
2. Offer water – this is a MUST. It can be distilled or filtered water in a shallow dish with paper toweling in it to prevent drownings OR offer plain, food-grade [water crystals](#) (available on Amazon, Chewy, Dubiaroach.com) as a moisture source. DO NOT offer Fluker's Quencher gel.
3. Very lightly dust the roaches with plain calcium carbonate just before feeding them to turtles. This is easily accomplished by adding a pinch of calcium to a mixing bowl and swirling the roaches around in it. Dubias cannot climb out of the bowl. Serve the roaches right away to ensure that they do not have time to defecate and lose nutritional value. (Tip: Pinch the head of the roach to disable it enough so your turtle can catch it! Dubias will quickly bury themselves otherwise.)

Dubia roaches and care info are available at dubiaroach.com.

NEVER offer any larval insects, such as mealworms, super worms, mightie mealies, butterworms, or waxworms. *They are habit-forming and can cause osteoporosis if eaten as a major part of the diet.*

NEVER offer commercially-raised crickets. *They may carry parasites transmissible to turtles.*

VII. TIPS FOR OFFERING FOOD TO TURTLES

1. Feed turtles in what *they view* as a safe place. Some turtles don't mind eating out in the open, but many eat far better if fed under or next to plants (fake or real) that make the turtles feel less visible to potential predators (imagined or real) and to fellow pen mates. This is particularly true of small juveniles that have many predators as wild animals and like to keep hidden. Remember, your turtle is a wild animal at heart; it just lives in captivity. Make life comfortable!
2. Avoid installing flowering plants attractive to bees and wasps in your outdoor turtle habitat. These pollinators may not be interested in your turtle's food, but turtles are quite nervous around them, and will be more likely to fully utilize their space and comfortably sit to eat if they don't see these insects buzzing around. (If you serve meat, which is NEVER recommended, you may attract yellowjackets to your diet!)
3. Give each turtle its own dish of food, positioned so no two turtles look at each other or are close together. Some turtles will eat well alongside other pen mates of comparable size, but many won't or at least won't eat well and will be stressed out. It has nothing to do with the amount of food available. Turtles will walk right over a dish of food to steal food from another turtle. This is especially true with hatchlings and young juveniles. They can get very aggressive at feeding time, biting (and injuring) the face, feet, and tail of fellow pen mates.
4. Feed turtles on a surface that is easy to eat from and can be washed between meals. A flat or very low-sided saucer, soft plastic butter tub lid (not brittle plastic), or [ZooMed ReptiRock](#) food dish work well. The author likes soy dishes pushed into the substrate and angled to the turtle to make eating easy. If ants are a problem, feed on heavy plates arranged on a tray with a skim of water in it. Turtles don't mind getting their feet wet to eat, but they generally walk away from food invaded by ants. DO NOT weight the dish with gravel, even large chunks; select a dish heavy enough not to float around. Turtles can ingest amazingly large objects that they cannot pass without internal damage, and gravel in a food dish may be consumed.
5. Be sure the ground is moist where you are serving food since it will reduce the amount of debris that attaches to the food if the turtles drop/spread it on the ground.
6. In warm weather, lightly spray the turtle area at feeding time to tell the turtles it's time to eat. In the wild, turtles look for food right after daytime summer rain. CAUTION: During the summer, water initially comes out VERY HOT from a hose sitting in the sun. Run the hose away from turtles until the temperature is comfortable to your hand.
7. Be prepared to adjust the feeding schedule to take into account the weather. There is no point in feeding outdoor turtles if a cold front is moving through. Feed as soon as the weather breaks. This is what turtles do in the wild. They eat when it's warm and don't eat when it's cold or inclement. If it gets cool at night, feed mid-morning when it starts to warm up. Turtles tend to eat best in the morning hours but only if warm enough.