

The successful keeping of tortoises involves offering a wide variety of foods to promote healthy appetites and provide essential nutrients. In their native environments they will browse freely among the many types of plants they encounter. This article will explore some of the readily available plant species which many tortoises consume with gusto.

Landscaping with plants which provide food and shelter for tortoises is not difficult. Many suitable plants are very ornamental and are adaptable to a wide range of climates, and many can be grown in containers.

It is important to remember that plants destined for consumption by chelonians should be free of residues from pesticides, fungicides or herbicides. Very little information exists on the effects of these powerful chemicals on "cold blooded" animals; therefore, it is wise to be scrupulous in avoiding the exposure of your tortoises to these substances. Granular (pelletized) fertilizers are also potentially dangerous and should not be used in areas in which tortoises live and/or graze. Snail bait is extremely toxic and should be rigorously avoided.

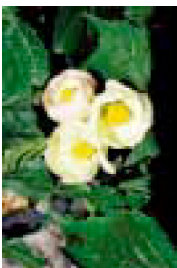
The scientific or botanical names for the plants reviewed in this article are provided in parentheses. Common names for plants vary locally, but the botanical names are used worldwide, recognized from the Antilles to Zambia. The reader will be assured of getting the exact plant being described when it is identified by its botanical name.



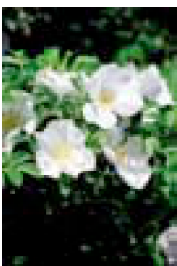
Tropical Hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) flowers and leaves are nutritious favorites of many tortoises. This large evergreen shrub may reach 15 feet at maturity and requires frequent, deep waterings for best performance. It also requires some protection from hot afternoon sun in the warmer inland areas. Many flower colors are available, from white through yellow and pink to orange and red. It is a garden favourite here in the UAE



Blue Hibiscus (*Alyogyne huegelii*) is in the same family as the Tropical Hibiscus. It requires full sun, grows well in less-than-perfect soils, and is quite drought tolerant once established in the garden. Blue Hibiscus is an evergreen shrub which reaches a height of 5-8 feet at maturity. Its lilac blue flowers are relished by many tortoises. It is not common in the UAE but will grow here.



Chinese Lantern (*Abutilon hybridum*) has flowers which many tortoises find delectable. This evergreen shrub grows at a moderate rate and requires regular watering for best appearance and flower production. It reaches a height of 8 to 10 feet with an equal spread at maturity. Flower colors include white, pink, yellow, red and several bi-colors.



Rose (*Rosa* species) blossoms are enjoyed by tortoises. Floribunda roses produce masses of flowers, stay a manageable size and are often more pest- and disease-resistant than Hybrid Tea roses (the most commonly grown of the roses). Floribundas generally require less pruning for flower production than Hybrid Teas. *Rosa rugosa* species are said to have the most delicious flowers of all roses. *Rosa rugosa* "Cecile Brunner" and "Belle of Portugal" are highly recommended for quality of flavor, but these grow to huge proportions and one must have plenty of room for them.



Geraniums (*Pelargonium* species) are also enjoyed by tortoises. Many varieties of geranium are commonly available. The garden shop off Khaleej al Arabi sometimes has a stock in the winter or you will sometimes find them indoors in hotels where cuttings can be taken. Geraniums grow easily from cuttings and are happy outside from November to around May., You should take some inside for the summer and pot out a few cuttings in October for planting out in November. The best performer is a type of Ivy Geranium known as the Balcon Geranium (*Pelargonium peltatum*). It is resistant to geranium bud-worm and flowers profusely for most of the year, bearing pink or red flowers. Scented geraniums are said to have superior flavor compared to other geraniums, particularly Rose Geranium (*P. graveolens*) and Peppermint Geranium (*P. tomentosum*).

The Mulberry Tree (*Morus alba*) bears leaves on which tortoises will feed. It should be borne in mind that Mulberry Trees can produce fruits which stain patios, paths and clothing (even after passing through the birds that love them). For this reason, the home gardener often chooses a fruitless type. For ease of harvesting and for maximum shade, a weeping form of Mulberry is best. *Morus alba* "Pendula" (fruiting) and *M. alba* "Chaparral" (non-fruiting) are highly recommended. They are easily available in the UAE.

The much-maligned Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is a delicious treat. Both leaves and flowers of this "weed" (a weed after all, is a plant out of place) delight tortoises and other vegetarian reptiles. If you cannot tolerate them in your garden, consider growing dandelions in a container and harvest them for your grateful chelonians. They do grow in the UAE during the winter.



Many commonly grown ornamentals have edible flowers. Nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum majus*), day lilies (*Hemerocallis* species), violets, Johnny-jump-ups, and pansies (*Viola*) all have pleasant-tasting flowers which are used in human cuisine. Some members of the Chrysanthemum family are edible while others are toxic, so be cautious about offering chrysanthemums to tortoises.

Commonly grown culinary herbs often have edible flowers. Fennel (*Foeniculum*), thyme (*Thymus*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus*), sage (*Salvia*), basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) and arugula all bear edible blossoms.

Many items from the home vegetable garden are also received enthusiastically by tortoises. Young leaf lettuces (red-leaf in particular), flowers from the Squash family (*Cucurbita* species, pumpkin, zucchini, etc.) cucumbers, Brussels sprouts, and many other commonly grown vegetables will provide substantial nutrition. Try planting sweet potatoes, these can be bought in any supermarket and planted whole. They will, if properly nourished, produce crops of edible tubers for your table and also produce a lush, attractive green vine which tortoises find irresistible (it may be wise to plant them in pots so that at least one part of the plant isn't totally denuded).

Cacti are popular in the Gulf, tortoises do not seem to eat the flesh, but will stand on hind legs to reach the flowers of most species.

And, finally, there are garden snails, a garden product which flourishes, like it or not. Many tortoise keepers report the routine consumption of snails (sometimes after being crushed by the keeper) on the part of their tortoises as well as their box turtles. Some professionals have expressed concerns about the possibility of parasites being carried by snails, but tortoise keepers have reported no particular problems with snail consumption.

With thanks to Mary Cohen