

IT TAKES MORE THAN LETTUCE

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Many references have been made about lettuce being a poor quality food, and the potential danger of loss of tortoises that are fed mostly lettuce. Yet there are a few die-hards whose comments have been overheard, "My tortoises haven't eaten anything but lettuce for years and still look good."

Lettuce is universally known to be one of the main items on human diets for losing weight—and for good reason. It is among those lowest in calories, per volume, of most fruits and vegetables. It is also lowest in vitamin and mineral content. A 100% diet of lettuce would require about 25 heads, or 12 pounds, per day to meet the average daily minimum needs of vitamins and minerals for a human. Statistically, a 10 pound tortoise eating one head of lettuce should proportionately receive its vitamin and mineral needs. This does not, however, prove to be true. Other popular items that are listed by the General Foods Value Chart as being equally low are cucumbers, celery hearts, apples, pears and watermelon.

The main value in these foods is the high water content. Surprisingly, they all have an appreciable amount of ascorbic acid, or vitamin C - lettuce and cucumbers being the lowest. Because of their high water content, these foods are often fed to animals in place of providing drinking water. Many rodents and herbivorous reptiles have been known to survive for years without drinking water, moisture being provided by lettuce. They were, however, fed a well-balanced diet along with it.

Should we do away with all of these foods that our tortoises literally run across the yard to enjoy at feeding time? Not at all...no more than you would completely eliminate candy, cake and cookies from your diet. Feed them as a dessert and as a fill-in now and then when other more nourishing foods are not available. Animals in their natural environment instinctively select the foods that will provide them with their vitamin and mineral needs. In captivity they are at the mercy of those feeding them.

There are very few desert plants that are readily handy to the city dweller, but there are several easily available foods that will provide most of the vitamin and mineral needs for tortoises. (They are valuable in human diets, too.) Most of us

have one of these growing wild in our own backyards. A plant that is second highest on the list of fruits and vegetables for being loaded with most of the mineral and vitamins is dandelions and their greens. Turnip greens are the highest, with kale and broccoli next. Turnip greens are the highest in calcium of any other vegetable. Kale is next. They are also highest in iron of all vegetables and they are the highest vegetable in Vitamin A. Turnip greens, kale, dandelion greens, cantaloupe and Brussels sprouts are all high in Vitamin C, broccoli and green pepper being the highest.

How does one get a tortoise to eat his "spinach?" There are several methods that have been successful. However, as with children, no one method will work for all. Some herders feed their tortoise's favorite foods as a dessert, and only after they have eaten sufficiently of the more nourishing course. But some tortoises would rather fight than switch and take to fasting. It has been found that most tortoises will begin to eat what is provided in a few days when deprived of lettuce. A few herders become concerned and feel that this treatment is unkind and have experienced success by chopping up and mixing the lettuce with the value greens. Then, day-by-day, reducing the amount of lettuce. Others have merely wrapped lettuce around the other foods and their tortoises eat right on through, seemingly not knowing the difference. For the really tough cases, try grinding up lettuce or liquefying it and soaking the value greens in the solution for a while. If none of these methods work, it just proves that some tortoises are a lot smarter than many people think they are. Being outsmarted by a tortoise can be deflating to one's ego!

If your herd is not kept in a place where grass is growing, give them a nice pile of grass cuttings when you mow. Instead of throwing your weeds and plant trimmings in the trash or mulch pile, let your tortoise work them over. You may be surprised at some of the things that appeal to them. Of course, care must always be taken to not spray the food areas and grass with insecticides. Especially so, if your turtles and tortoises have the run of the backyard.

(T.E.A.M. = Turtle & Tortoise Adoption Media)

Clovis Turtle and Tortoise Rescue
Yvonne M. Gomez - 559 298-7114