TORTOISE TIME:

This sheet is to provide basic care info for a variety of desert tortoise species. Doing research on the specific species you are interested in is important. This is just the general requirements that are true for most tortoise species.

HABITAT: Tortoises require large habitats that offer plenty of room for exploring. Most tortoises thrive in outdoor enclosures; however, hatchling tortoises should be kept inside. Juveniles and adults can be moved to outdoor pens when they are ready. If you have a small species tortoise and must keep it indoors, an open habitat such as a tortoise table is best. A general guideline is to offer small species tortoises between 5-8 inches (Russians, Hermans, etc) at least a 4 feet by 2 feet pen (though bigger is better). Another square foot should be added for each inch beyond that. For example an average sized adult African Sulcata tortoise should be kept in a yard no less than 21 square feet. As always more is better.

SUBSTRATE: Hatchlings do best on paper towels, or reptile carpet. It is important to monitor their poop to assure they are healthy and eating. Juveniles and adults do best on natural substrate that can hold some moisture and allow for digging. Yard dirt is fine, but indoor habitats should have coconut fiber bedding such as eco-earth. The dirt should be deep enough for the tortoise to burry itself. There should be a damp area (not soaking wet) and a dry area so they can control their humidity.

LIGHTING: Tortoises need at least 12 hours of sunlight a day. Natural sunlight is the best option, and easy to achieve with outdoor pens. Indoor habitats need to provide artificial sunlight by using special UVB producing bulbs. These bulbs can be purchased on line or at a local pet store. The light bulb itself will stay lit for a long time, but the UV strength diminishes over time, so it is important to make sure to check the life of the bulb and replace it before the UV runs out. Without this bulb, the tortoise cannot metabolize calcium. This will result in a condition called MBD (metabolic bone disease) which will cause mis-shaped or broken bones as well as other adverse conditions.

HEAT: Tortoises need to be able to get really warm. This can be accomplished by providing a heat lamp. Ceramic heat emitters are best as they produce high temperatures, without light, and they last a very long time. This should be placed over one side of the habitat. Outdoor tortoises should be provided with heated houses. You can also use outdoor livestock heat mats.

FOOD: Almost all tortoises are vegetarians. They need to eat a lot of plant matter. Most tortoises are from desert areas and are designed to eat low nutrient, dried plant matter. In deserts where not a lot of healthy moist foods grow, tortoises have adapted to survive off dried dying plants. Because of this it is important in captivity to offer similar diets. Dark leafy greens and dried grasses should make up the majority of the diet. Kale, Collard Greens, Mustard Greens, Mulberry Leaves, and Dandelion Greens are all good choices. Spinach should be used sparingly as it is high in oxalic acid which can build up in the system and block calcium absorption. Ice berg lettuce, romaine, and other light colored lettuces have an enzyme that slows the digestion preventing reptiles from absorbing the proper amount of nutrition, and should therefore NEVER be fed to the tortoises. Dried grasses such as Timothy Hay, Orchard Grass Hay, and Fescue Hay should be offered. Pet stores sell hay pellets for tortoises that can be offered. Alfalfa hay should not be offered as a staple as the protein content is too high and not good for them in large quantities. Squash and carrots can be offered regularly as well. Fruit is too high in moisture and sugar to be given often, but can be offered in tiny amounts once a week as a treat.

SUPPLEMENTS: All reptiles need calcium. Tortoises are no exception. Small species should have calcium powder sprinkled on their food at least twice a week. Large species can be offered cuttlebone for their calcium intake. These supplies can be purchased on line or at any pet store.

WATER: One of the biggest mistakes people make when caring for tortoises is assuming they do not need much water because they are desert dwellers. Hatchlings especially need humidity in their habitats. In the wild they stay in burrows below ground where they maintain humidity levels that allow them to grow. In the desert the temperatures are so high during the day, and so low during the night, that moisture collects and allows the tortoises to drink. Shallow water should be provided in containers that are large enough for the tortoise to climb its whole body into. The dish cannot be higher than their eyes or they will not realize there is water in it.

If you have any questions or concerns that are not addressed here, you can reach out to Creepy Critters Rescue at anytime.