

Turtles can make great pets, but do your homework first

June 5 2018, by Katherine Roth



This 2016 photo provided by Chris Leone of Garden State Tortoise shows two Russian Tortoises in Galloway, N.J. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Chris Leone/Garden State Tortoise via AP)

While turtles might seem like the perfect pet—less work than dogs and cats, more interactive than fish—there are a few things to keep in mind before buying one.

"They are definitely becoming more popular as pets. Some of them are very beautiful and they can be easily purchased over the internet. But there's no such thing as an easy pet," says Katrina Smith, adoptions coordinator for the Maryland-based Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

First, never take a wild turtle as a pet.

"Chances are they won't do well in captivity," Smith says. "Look into adopting a turtle from your local turtle society or www.petfinder.com before buying one. And if you do buy, make absolutely sure it's been born in captivity."

The cute, tiny [turtles](#) often found at tourist shops across the country may be hard to resist, but turtle experts say you should.

"Don't buy those tiny turtles you see for sale in Chinatown in New York, or in tourist shops in Daytona Beach on spring break," Smith says. "They're being sold illegally."

Some states, like New Jersey, require permits for pet turtles, largely due to concerns about already stressed populations of native turtles, Smith says. Be sure to check local laws before deciding what kind of turtle to adopt, Smith says.



This 2015 photo provided by Chris Leone of Garden State Tortoise shows a Western Hermann's tortoise from Apulia, Italy after a rain showing its bright coloration in Galloway, N.J. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Chris Leone/Garden State Tortoise via AP)

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Because many turtles carry salmonella, young children, the elderly, pregnant women and others at risk should avoid contact with turtles or be extra careful to wash their hands thoroughly after touching them.

Connected to this risk, federal law prohibits selling turtles less than 4 inches in size because of the risk of children putting them in their mouths.

Dave Pauli, a senior adviser for wildlife response and policy for the Humane Society of the United States, runs a large turtle and tortoise rescue and rehabilitation center in Billings, Montana. He stresses the importance of "good hygiene protocol" when taking a turtle into a home.



This 2016 photo provided by Chris Leone of Garden State Tortoise shows a head close-up of a Russian Tortoise in Galloway, N.J. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Chris Leone/Garden State Tortoise via AP)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urge people to treat all turtles as if they are contaminated with salmonella, because they probably are. Wash hands thoroughly after touching turtles, their cages or their feces, and do not touch your face, other people, or any surface

until your hands have been washed. Also, turtles should be kept separate from food and kept away with people at high risk of infection, the center advises.

PICKING THE RIGHT VARIETY

Some turtles that start out small can grow to the size of a garbage can lid, so do your homework ahead of time when selecting a type and gender of turtle to call your own. In many species, females grow to be much larger than their male counterparts, Smith says.

The best varieties for beginners are male painted turtles, U.S. mud and musk turtles, and male red-eared sliders, she says.



This 2015 photo provided by Chris Leone of Garden State Tortoise shows a Eastern Hermann's tortoise in Galloway, N.J. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what

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CARING FOR YOUR ANIMAL

"Turtles require more maintenance and space than most people generally assume," Pauli says, "and they live for decades, so buyers should be aware that they are a pet that may well outlive them."

Turtles require a varied and sometime messy diet, room to roam in an aquarium and strict temperature control. Their habitat needs to be cleaned more often than many people realize, although water turtles require less maintenance than box turtle or other varieties.

GET TO KNOW YOUR TURTLE



This 2015 photo provided by Chris Leone of Garden State Tortoise shows a Western Hermann's tortoise from Apulia, Italy in a clover patch in Galloway, N.J. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Chris Leone/Garden State Tortoise via AP)

Turtles can be beautiful pets and "are really cool to have," Pauli says. "They're extremely interesting and have individual personalities. But they are exotic pets, and pet store owners are generally an extremely poor source of information about them."

Experts advise seeking out a local turtle and tortoise society or club—there are dozens across the country—for information and animals. Turtle societies can answer questions about caring for pets and promoting turtle welfare.

If you have a turtle that is proving to be more than you can handle, contact a turtle society about what to do, and never release them into the wild.

Certain types of turtle—red-eared sliders, for example—are so frequently released by pet owners into the wild that they have become an invasive species around the world, and are threatening native turtle populations.

Turtles are hardy and can be wonderful pets, experts say. Just know what you're getting into, and how to care for them properly to ensure a healthy life for the turtle, its owner, and native species in your area.



This photo provided by Katrina Smith of the Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society shows an Eastern Box turtle. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Katrina Smith/Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society via AP)



This photo provided by Katrina Smith of the Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society shows is a eastern painted turtle. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Katrina Smith/Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society via AP)



This photo provided by Katrina Smith of the Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society shows a common musk turtle. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Katrina Smith/Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society via AP)



This photo provided by Katrina Smith of the Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society shows is a baby red-eared slider turtle on top of an adult female red-eared slider. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Katrina Smith/Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society via AP)



This photo provided by Katrina Smith of the Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society shows a baby Sulcata turtle on top of a young adult sulcata. Turtles may seem like the perfect low-maintenance pet—less work than dogs and cats and more interactive than fish. And they can make wonderful pets. But experts say you should know what you're getting into first and how much work will be involved. (Katrina Smith/Mid-Atlantic Turtle & Tortoise Society via AP)

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