



## North American Softshell Turtles (*Genus Apalone sp.*)

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- Softshell turtles, depending on the species, are largely aquatic turtles indigenous to permanent water bodies (lakes, large ponds, rivers, and impoundments) from southern Canada, through much of the eastern half of the United States and into Mexico.
- Softshell turtles' most distinctive feature are their soft, flattened cartilaginous shells (lacking hardened bony scutes). They may be olive, olive brown, to pinkish brown with darker blotches, spots, or ocelli on the carapace.
- These turtles also have a tubular pig or snorkel like snout and, being highly aquatic, are strong swimmers.
- Species include the Smooth Softshell (*A. mutica*), Spiny Softshell (*A. spinifera*) and Florida Softshell (*A. ferox*).
- If provided the correct care, softshell turtles can attain longevity of 20-30 years or more.

### Size

Softshells are large turtles that are often sexually dimorphic, with males being smaller. Males range from 5 to 10 ½” while females can reach sizes as large as 18-24” carapace size.

### Housing

Softshell turtles are active and powerful swimmers. Provide a sturdy, escape proof aquarium or commercially available turtle tub of sufficient size with an elevated dock or basking area/access to dry land using a substrate dam. Softshells will still bask and emerge from the water to do so. Provide a minimum of 10 gallons of space per inch of shell, or about 50-200 gallons depending on the age and size of the turtle. **It should be noted that softshells have the potential to become quite large (particularly the females), and appropriate accommodations must be provided.** If the outdoor climate permits, a custom designed pond or other form of housing allowing for more space may also be used, but is beyond the scope of this care sheet. A powerful water filter rated at least twice that of the amount of water in the enclosure is highly recommended for aquatic turtles, as they are messy and require frequent cleaning and regular water changes. Use a submersible water heater with a guard to maintain water temperatures of 70-80 degrees F. Substrate is optional, and foregoing it makes for easier cleaning and maintenance, but if it is used, then sand or fine gravel should be used to house softshells. Most other substrates are not recommended for these turtles since they lack the hardened scutes of most other turtles and can cause abrasions and potential injury. Additional rocks, logs, live or artificial foliage for softshells can also be provided for additional foraging and hiding opportunities.

Additional overhead lighting and heating elements are necessary to maintain optimal health and nutrition for these turtles (UVA/UVB and vitamin D). Provide a basking area or platform with UVB and UVA for your softshell to emerge completely from the water and monitor at around 95-100 degrees F. Softshells can be housed with other turtles of the same or different species, but is generally not suggested as either they, or other inhabitants, will cause injury to one another and compete for food and basking areas.

### Feeding/Diet

In the wild, softshell turtles are largely carnivorous, although small bits of algae and other plant matter may also be eaten. They will feed on small fish, frogs, carrion (dead animal matter), aquatic insects, crustaceans, worms, and other invertebrates.

In captivity, softshells can be given a variety of prey or food items including frozen/thawed

pinkie mice, commercialized turtle pellets and diets, small feeder fish, superworms, earthworms, mealworms, feeder roaches or crickets, freeze dried shrimp, krill, and other meats such as chicken, beef, and ground turkey. Dog and cat foods can also be used, but sparingly. A varied diet is important, and providing some additional vitamin D3 and calcium supplementation during 2-3 times weekly feeding also is beneficial.

### **Handling**

Softshell turtles are large and active turtles that require only experienced care and handling. They have very long necks and strong jaws, strong webbed claws, and can be aggressive. Captive bred and born softshells can become more docile and accustomed to people and some handling, but these species overall are more hands off and better suited as display animals. Overhandling causes stress to these animals and should be minimized or done sparingly when and wherever possible.

**\*\*Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens\*\***