

SLIM JIM?

As a child I remember walking around the markets in France and seeing crates of live tortoises for sale presumably destined for the gallic kitchens. I felt very sorry for these reptiles as they had no way of stretching their legs, and no food or water, so several times I spent my pocket money on buying a couple and releasing them back into the wild. The warm climate there is ideal for them to thrive which is unfortunately not the case in this country.

It was a wet, windy day in April when Jim was brought into my consulting room in a large cardboard box packed with newspaper. On enquiring how Jim was I was told by the owners that they were worried about him as they had not heard him rustling about which they normally would have done by now. Jim, a 60 year old spur thighed tortoise, had apparently been in hibernation since the previous October, and the owners were worried about opening the box! With some trepidation I unpacked Jim from the box and was relieved to find him moving his legs. However he was weak and dehydrated from being hibernated for too long a period and was too weak to start eating on his own. Jim had to endure having fluids injected into him to rehydrate him and the fitting of a feeding tube into the side of his neck to allow him to become strong enough to start eating again on his own. He was lucky to recover as many tortoises might of died from his condition.

Tortoises are complicated pets to keep, mainly as being cold blooded, they need to be kept at the correct temperature to function properly; their body temperature is the same as the environment around them. Our summers are usually too cold for them and this means everything about them works at a reduced rate so they do not eat enough and do not lay down enough reserves to overwinter if they are hibernated. During hibernation they still use energy and if they are kept at too warm a temperature during hibernation, often the case with mild winters, they use even more energy than they should which can result in them waking up like Jim and being too weak to eat. This condition is called post hibernation anorexia.

The secret at preventing this condition is keeping your tortoise warm enough in the summer and cold enough during hibernation. On cool

days in the summer your tortoise is best kept in under a heat lamp and UVB (daylight) lamp. While hibernating it needs to be kept at between 4 and 10 degrees centigrade which can be done by keeping it in a fridge. Of course it must not freeze. If your tortoise is not strong enough to hibernate it will need to be kept awake overwinter under lights. In any case it is not considered safe to hibernate your tortoise for more than 3 months.

If you are worried about your tortoise get it checked by a Veterinary Surgeon. For more information please visit the 'British Chelonian Group' (BCG) website at www.britishchelonigroup.org.uk. They hold sessions in the spring and autumn where you can take your tortoise to be weighed and to be given further advice.

Spur-thighed tortoise

