

BUILDING A HIBERNATION PIT FOR BOX TURTLES

Hibernation pits provide your box turtle a safe location in which to hibernate. We suggest putting **at least** one pit in your box turtle pen; more than one is always better.

We developed these pits because our boxie pen was located in an area with heavy clay soil. We didn't think our turtles would be able to dig down far enough to avoid freezing during the winter. After the first winter, we found our boxies also used them as shelters to avoid the heat of the day during the spring and summer months.

We excavated a hole that was 18 inches deep and about 18 inches wide. Discarding the clay soil that we excavated, we refilled the hole to a depth of about 16 inches with a mixture of peat moss, top soil, shredded leaves and twigs, and a bit of compost. Basically, you're refilling the hole with a loose, easily-dug compost that you can water on a regular basis – this keeps it slightly moistened to help your turtles avoid dehydration.

Turtles like solid roofs. To provide them with this, lay four standard construction bricks at the edge of the pit, one at each side. Then lay a square sheet of ¾-inch plywood atop the bricks. The turtles use the gaps between the bricks to enter and exit the pit area as needed. Spread hay (or straw) over the top of the plywood to provide insulation from both cold and heat. Hay may compact over time, so make sure you either replace it or add more over the top as needed. After you're sure your turtles are down for the winter, cover the top and sides of the lid with additional hay to seal all the openings. If we have a dry winter, remember to open and water the pit once a month to keep it and your turtles hydrated.

When spring arrives and nighttime temps are warmer than 40°F, you can gradually remove some of the hay covering the openings. On sunny and warm spring days, you may want to open the lid all the way and let the sun warm the pit. Do a yard check around sunset to make sure any early-rising turtles get back to the pit so they won't freeze overnight. Close the lid after sunset and replace the hay as needed.

Hibernation Pit for Box Turtles -- Side View

