

# T rtoise Group Newsletter

The Organization for the Protection of Nevada's Resident Tortoises, Inc.  
A non-profit organization since 1982

Volume XVI No. 3, August 2003

[www.tortoisegroup.org](http://www.tortoisegroup.org)

Las Vegas, Nevada

## Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

If you are finding that many of the ornamentals you planted for your tortoise are putting forth few if any flowers during this hot weather, remember Petunias. Yes, they are annuals, and your tortoise will probably eat the whole plant, but if your priorities include keeping your tortoise in flowers...

You might think about planting the native shrub Desert Willow, *Chilopsis linearis* (not a true willow). It grows rapidly to about 8 feet and produces small white or purple trumpet-shaped flowers, spring and summer. Some folks trim it as a tree. However, the more branches you leave, the more flowers. You can harvest 50 or more

flowers each day and they keep coming. The flowers also attract hummingbirds.

## Ideas about Diet

**MegaDiet alone.** We want to emphasize that a diet of commercial produce, alone, is not adequate. We urge you to work toward a diet with no produce. Instead, offer the staple, MegaDiet, and growing forage including ornamentals from our list, Information Sheet #21. Also offer young mulberry and grape leaves, grass, dandelions and only the flowers and vegetative parts of such plants as melon, squashes, and corn. No fruit. The sugar in fruits creates an environment in the intestines that is very supportive of parasites.

**Offer no produce** - that's the way to start hatchlings off right. There's no need to teach a habit that may require considerable effort to break.

**Needed bacteria.** Hatchlings must develop a bacterial component in the large intestine in order to break down fibers from forage eaten. That process provides needed nutrients. The needed bacteria live in topsoil and adults tortoises have them. In the past we have passed along the recommendation to offer hatchlings the dried scats (droppings) of adults.

## Fabulous Annual Picnic October 19 Details on page 5

However, the scats of adults may contain pathogens and parasites. Give your hatchlings access to topsoil - essentially, soil in which watered plants are growing. Do not give sand.

## Tortoise Group Information by e-mail

Tortoise Group now offers two services by e-mail:

1) Newsletter and 2) Notices of upcoming meetings and other events or topics of interest.

If you wish to sign up for either of these services, please send your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number to Kathy at [utiger@juno.com](mailto:utiger@juno.com) and specify List 1 or List 2.

**List 1:** Receive by e-mail the newsletter and notices of events

**List 2:** Receive by e-mail notices of events but continue to receive the newsletter in hard-copy form.

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**Tortoise Adoptions  
and Consultations  
Are Free  
Call 739-8043**

## Arizona Adoption Program

The Tortoise Group Adoption Program shares some policies and ideas with the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Tortoise Adoption Program in Tucson.

- Prospective custodians are carefully screened and educated on all aspects of desert tortoise husbandry and the current status of wild tortoises.
- Backyard breeding is discouraged because the disposition of young tortoises is often difficult and there is always a surplus of juvenile tortoises. Tortoise Group has observed that many hatchlings are given away, hastily, with no instructions about proper care. Death rate among adopted juveniles has been unacceptable despite our special effort to prepare the adopters. We have set a new minimum size for adoption, 7 inches
- No adoption of a male and female or a tortoise to create a mating pair.

As expressed by those in the Arizona Adoption Program, adoption helps to bring home awareness of the plight of wild tortoises and the public is more likely to take an active role in their conservation. Programs

such as Tortoise Group's adoption and school programs, the Clark County Mojave Max Emergence Contest, and efforts by several other local entities have caused an increasing number of the public to develop a familiarity with and/or real fondness for the tortoise. We then see that folks develop a proprietary concern for both wild and pet tortoises.



**Mating occurs at any time but especially in spring and fall**

### Preparing to Hibernate

This issue of the newsletter will be the last until next March, so we always include a few reminders about getting your tortoise ready for winter.

**Drinking.** We think it is a good idea for your tortoises to be well hydrated before winter. You may not have seen your tortoise drink except when it rains. That is when they naturally seek out puddles.

Even if your tortoise has had an opportunity to drink rain water

between now and the time the tortoise retreats for the winter, it won't hurt to offer more water in late September. Place the tortoise in a basin of tepid water, filled to just under the chin. Stay with the tortoise. You may have to wait a few minutes for the tortoise to decide to take a drink.

**Eating.** Some tortoises will eat heartily in late summer and then gradually decrease their intake. Some will eat without any apparent reduction in amount right up to the time they are no longer active. That may be any time between late September and the first week in November.

### Juvenile burrow protection

An idea to further protect the burrows of small juveniles from becoming wet inside from rain is to cover the soil on top of the burrows with thin layers of grass clippings toward the end of summer. The clippings form a firm mat that remains dry just under the surface unless the rain is exceptionally heavy or of long duration. If each layer of clippings is sufficiently thin, the juveniles will not have difficulty walking on them. If done right, the tortoise will not sink in. The clipping will knit together and become compacted without your help, holding firmly to the sloping surface of the top of the burrow. The clippings differ from a waterproofing material, which cuts off air circulation and traps heat.

## Is a Tortoise Death Trap Lurking Your Back Yard?

An alert about the hidden danger in grass from sod farms

By Dave Hawley

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In the last 20 years I have cared for dozens of tortoises in various types of back yards, from a raw yard at a new house to a decorative rock/grass combination. The tortoises were always well cared for with textbook yards and burrows, and even an experienced tortoise caregiver for my absences. I thought I was doing everything right. You can imagine my devastation when one of my tortoises died, tangled in the nylon mesh from sod.

In preparation to sell my home, I began dressing up the whole residence including the yard. I had always used grass seed, steer manure, and fertilizer, but this year the job took me away for the planting season. When I finally could plant, the folks at the nursery suggested using farm-grown grass sod. It was easy to use and looked great.

During another absence, a power outage disrupted the timing on the automatic sprinkler system. The grass gradually started to be stressed from the lack of water and the results were interesting. The grass from seed did pretty well; the sod did not, probably due to a poorly developed root system.

The sod died back almost immediately and the deadly ingredients used during the production began to show. The sod is germinated from seed in a mixture of planting soil, fertilizer, and native soil, held together by a nylon mesh no bigger than a heavy fishing line. It is structured in a 1 ¼ by 7/8-inch matrix. When the sod died, the nylon mesh soon appeared on the surface along with the tragic results.

An 8-year-old tortoise with feet just the same size as the nylon mesh became tangled in the mesh and quickly died in the

hot sun. The larger tortoises have feet bigger than the mesh and had little difficulty. The small tortoises, one to four years old had problems too, but no fatalities.

The green mesh is amazingly camouflaged in the sod areas, alive and dead. I have since removed all the mesh with a stiff rake. This worked with the green healthy sod and the dead and dying parts too. If you use sod, take heed: remove that nylon mesh or you may be saddened like me.



**Young tortoises are easily caught in the 1 ¼ x 7/8-inch nylon mesh used for growing sod. Beware of this death trap!**

## Burrows in Winter

**Covering.** If we have a very wet winter, additional protection in the form of a waterproof sheet may be called for. Do not use plastic or other artificial material to cover a burrow when heavy rains occur unless the cover is put on when the rain starts and is removed *immediately* after the rain stops. Do not use a waterproof cover if there is any chance that you won't be home to remove it as soon as the rain stops. You do not want the warming from the green house effect that is created. Despite the potential for flooding, spending the winter in the burrow is still better for a tortoise than being indoors, especially for small tortoises.

**Flooding.** Check burrows for flooding and collapse. In winter the tortoise probably will not emerge if the burrow floods. If rain-soaked soil has caused a collapse, you probably won't see it on the outside of the burrow. The soil will harden and a tortoise under collapsed soil will have little chance of digging out when it awakens. The lack of oxygen may have caused death well before spring.

**Checking Inside.** Practice reflecting sunlight into the burrow with a mirror and read the section on Burrow Problems in the Tortoise Group pamphlet on adoption and care, now revised and in color.

## Tortoise Group Provides the Tiles for Hatchling Burrows

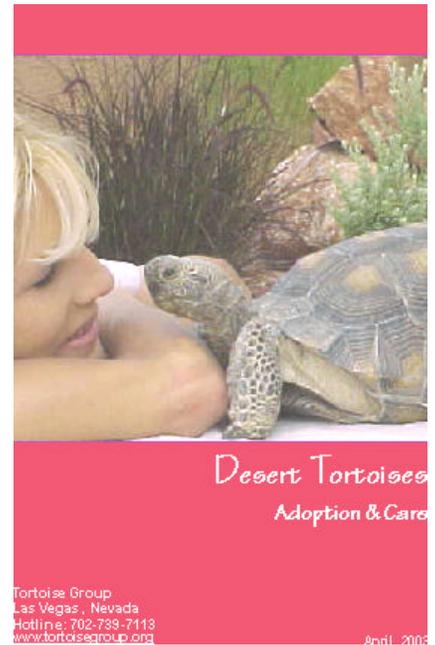
In the new, revised Tortoise Group pamphlet, *Desert Tortoises, Adoption and Care*, are photos and instructions for digging burrows for hatchlings and small juveniles up to about 3 ½ inches in shell length. Installing these burrows takes only a few minutes and the burrow shape is efficient for protecting the tortoises from the heat, cold, and rain.

Betty keeps a supply of the special rake roof tiles for these burrows. Finding these tiles is not usually easy. Give her a call at 739-8043 if you want to change the burrows for your small tortoises or are preparing for a hatching in a few weeks.

Betty expects the price to remain the same at \$2.50 each, with two or three needed per burrow per tortoise.

## Tortoise Care Pamphlet 2003 Available

The new color edition of Tortoise Group's "bible," *Desert Tortoises: Adoption and Care*, can now be found at all local veterinarians and libraries. You will find lots of new and useful information on feeding, habitat design, burrow building, medical care, and more.



**Desert Tortoises, Adoption and Care 2003 edition is packed with new information**

Please pick up some copies of the new pamphlet, one for your family and for your friends who have tortoises. You will be surprised at the amount of new information and interesting photos.

**Tortoise Group**  
**5157 Poncho Circle**  
**Las Vegas, NV 89119**  
**702-739-8043**

**Editor** Kathy Utiger

### Board of Directors

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The Tortoise Group newsletter is published three times yearly:  
 March, May, and August

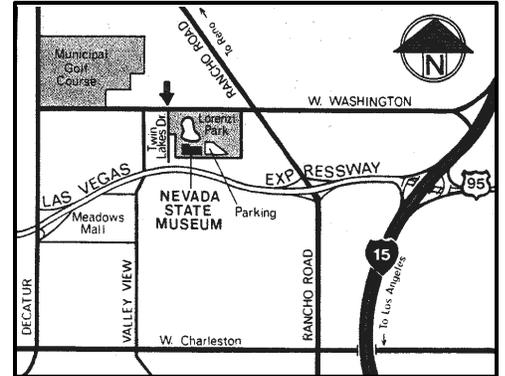
# Fall Meeting Schedule

**Nevada State Museum and Historical Society**  
**700 Twin Lakes Drive (in Lorenzi Park)**  
**Saturday, 1-3 pm**

(No admission charge to folks attending the Tortoise Group meeting)

**August 16 Information Fest: Pet Tortoises, Wild Tortoises, Preparing to Adopt a Tortoise**  
by Betty Burge, biologist

Hear all about hatchlings, mating, hibernation and lots of ideas about care of pet tortoises in Betty's slide presentation. Come with your questions about both pet and wild tortoises



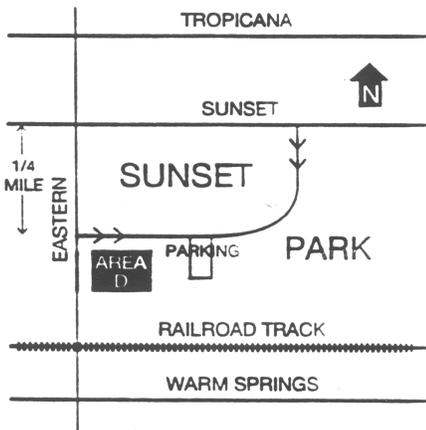
**September 20 The Tortoise Habitat: An Outdoor Teaching Lab for all Subjects**  
by Jerry Shupe, Glenace Melton, and Rick Watson

Tortoise habitat developers discuss the teaching/learning opportunities tortoise habitats provide for schools. Their presentation will be of particular interest to educators who are planning habitats and other outdoor learning projects or seeking advice on how to better use existing facilities. Watch the development of the habitat at Rick Watson School from bare desert to introduction of the tortoise.

**October 19**  
**Sunday, 12 noon - 3 pm**  
**Sunset Park, Area D**

**Annual Tortoise Group Picnic at Sunset Park**

Relax and enjoy an afternoon of tortoise tale swapping and pleasant conversation. Please bring a dish to share. Tortoise Group provides hamburgers, veggie burgers, hot dogs, soft drinks, and great company! For humans only.



If you should have any questions about the programs, dates, or locations, or if you would like further directions, please feel free to call Program Chairman Kathy Utiger at 804-0472.

MegaDiet, t-shirts, caps, tote bags available at general meetings.

## Members' Corner

### Satellite Sellers Still Sought

If you live in the southwest area of town and would consider selling MegaDiet from your home, please call Betty at 739-8043 to learn what's involved.

### Annual Meeting

A brief annual meeting of members will take place in September before the speaker. Any issues you would like to discuss should be brought up at that time.

### Tortoise Care Questionnaires

Karen Kampfer is still accepting the questionnaires sent out with the May newsletter about human interaction with tortoises. Please take the time to complete yours and send it by the deadline of September 30. Karen is using the information derived from the questionnaires as part of her doctoral thesis. Your thoughts really count, so take a moment to put them on paper. Karen sends her thanks in advance.

### Last Call for Memberships

If you have not yet renewed your Tortoise Group membership, it's not too late. If you become a new member, you will receive a free Tortoise Group cap or tote bag. Please take a moment to support the educational outreach and services of this worthy organization. Thank you.

### Fall Schedule of Events

- **August 16 Information Fest** by Betty Burge
- **September 20 The Tortoise Habitat**  
Evolution and use of tortoise habitats at schools
- **October 11 - Harvest Festival** at Red Rock -  
10 am - 4 pm. Environmental, animal, and  
outdoor displays; crafts for kids
- **October 19 Annual Picnic** at Sunset Park  
12 noon - 3 pm

See page 5 for details

### May Tour of Yards a Great Success

The May tour of backyard habitats in Summerlin was a great success. Already they're asking when the next one will be! 40 folks took advantage of the beautiful day to tour four very different types of yards. Visit Rich Ruocco's Website of the tour at <http://debsrich.tripod.com>.



**Tad's yard on a 20 x 50-foot lot was designed around a central dry area for the burrow**



**Native plants provide dry shelter at Maggie and Shelly's desert-like habitat on a half acre**

**Didn't Receive Your Newsletter?**

Our newsletters are sent out in early March, May and August, in time to notify you of the upcoming meetings on the third Saturday in those months, unless we have a field trip which may alter that date. If you did not receive your newsletter, call Betty at 739-8043 and she will check to see that you are on the mailing list. Unfortunately, newsletters are sometimes lost in the mail. So, by the end of the second

week in the above months let us know if you have not received your newsletter and we will send you another one.

**Evening Primrose Still Confined**

Two years ago, I planted some Evening Primroses where I thought they would not become invasive. They are surrounded by several feet of dry soil which to date has kept them under control. Knowing that this species is very hard to remove once established, tending to go

where ever there is damp soil, I have tried to beat this invasiveness and show that this lovely plant that tortoises like to eat can be enjoyed and controlled. By Betty Burge

<b>Information Directory</b>	
<b>TG Hotline</b>	739-8043
<b>Clark County Hotline</b>	383-TORT
<b>Adoption</b>	
Betty Burge	739-8043
<b>School Programs</b>	
Jerry Shupe	648-5190

**Tortoise Group Membership – Contribution Form**

Memberships and contributions may be tax deductible

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Individual 15.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
Family 25.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
Street \_\_\_\_\_ Sustaining 35.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
Sponsor 50.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Corporate 75.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
Life 200.00 \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_  
" Send my newsletter by email Additional Contribution \_\_\_\_\_  
" Send my newsletter in hard copy,  
and send meeting notices and other news by e-mail  
" Renewing member " New member **Total Amount Enclosed** \_\_\_\_\_

Except for Life members, memberships expire each Dec.31

**Make check payable to Tortoise Group. Mail with application to:  
Tortoise Group, 5157 Poncho Cir. Las Vegas, NV 89119**

### MEGADIET Satellite Sellers

Rancho & US 95	Ginger – 648-7603
Charleston & Nellis	Ruby – 431-0576
Summerlin Area	Cathy – 256-3817 (3 pm –8 pm)
Tropicana & Maryland	Betty –739-8043
Henderson, 89015	Laurie –558-6985 (after 12:00 noon)
Pahrump	Sheri –775-727-5557
Out-of-town orders	Betty –739-8043

A 1½ lb bag costing \$8.00 lasts a large tortoise about one month. MegaDiet is also sold at monthly Tortoise Group meetings.

**10% discount to TG members  
who show their cards**

### Websites of Interest

Tortoise Group	<a href="http://www.tortoisegroup.org">www.tortoisegroup.org</a>
Desert Tortoise Council	<a href="http://www.deserttortoise.org">www.deserttortoise.org</a>
California Turtle and Tortoise Club	<a href="http://www.tortoise.org">www.tortoise.org</a>
Tortoise Trust (United Kingdom and the USA)	<a href="http://www.tortoisetrust.org">www.tortoisetrust.org</a>
American tortoise Rescue (Southern California)	<a href="http://www.tortoise.com">www.tortoise.com</a>
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (California)	<a href="http://www.tortoise-tracks.org">www.tortoise-tracks.org</a>

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