Creating a Tortoise Habitat
Kathy Utiger
To provide conditions similar to those in the wild, a tortoise habitat needs:

- Well-insulated burrow
- Water dish
- Plants for browsing
- Removable gate barrier
- Escape-proof yard
- Tortoise-safe environment
- Areas of shade and sunlight
Tortoise is in burrow 95% of the time
- Tortoise is cold-blooded: it regulates body temperature by moving in and out of sunlight and the burrow

Tortoise basks to warm up enough to forage
Burrow Styles

- Underground
  - Insulated by surrounding and top soil

- Aboveground
  - Large amount of soil needed for insulation
Indian Dwelling—look familiar?

Like a big aboveground burrow, with several feet of soil insulation on top and on the sides

Very heavy soil insulation on the sides
Water is sure to keep cool

Very shallow water is cooled by the slightest breeze
Plants for Browsing

- It’s important for tortoises to browse independently and not have to be fed.

Some MegaDiet---lots of browsing

Tad nibbles on tufted evening primrose
Removable Gate Barrier

- Barrier stays in place when the gate is left open inadvertently.
- Most lost tortoises escape through the open gate.

Gate opens outward while board stays in place
When plywood rests on concrete or rock slab, tortoise can’t see or dig out.
Custodians will tell us:

- What challenges they faced in developing the habitat
- Any special accommodations they made
- Safety issues they had to overcome
- Special features they put in their habitats
- What plants are available for browsing—and which ones the tortoise eats
Cecil’s Setting under Construction
Cecil’s Setting under Construction

- Burrow—unfinished
- Shaded water pavilion

Solid caliche made digging next to impossible

Large dish fed by automatic sprinklers
Cecil’s Setting under Construction

- Back yard (left)
- Tortoise area (right)

Note gate barrier next to house
Plant area (left), burrow (center), water (right)
Removable barrier blocks hazards

Barrier will prevent tortoise from seeing out and getting stuck
Rose bushes in place. Plants for browsing to come. Will remove several rocks for tortoise access.

Potted plants can be tipped on side as occasional treats.
Konna’s Kingdom
Konna’s Kingdom

- Nice burrow
- Shaded water dish
Konna’s Kingdom

- Note rock holding stem down for easy eating

- Grapes, dandelions, and other plants for browsing
Konna’s Kingdom

More browsing, plus a bench for custodian

Special barrier to avoid squeezing Konna at the corner of the gate
Konna’s Kingdom

Back-to-front view of habitat

Blocked-off hazard
Konna’s Kingdom

Comfy sitting area

Ingenious cover to protect young plants (right)
Maxine’s Manor

- Removed some grass to make dry area
Maxine’s Manor

Burrow (center) and browsing plants (left)

Beautiful tortoise!
Maxine’s Manor

Yummy plants and doggy friend

Prune heavy foliage to make walkway by wall
Gate barrier stays in place when door is open. Needs solid base so tortoise can’t see or dig out.

Block off hazards
Cover with plywood, fencing that tortoise can see through

View of plywood from street
Maxine taking it easy

Heavy foliage is pruned to make for easy walking around the perimeter
Pokey’s Place

Water dish with stepping stone for wee ones

Tortoises can walk to all areas on dry ground, which is easier than walking on grass
Pokey’s Place

- Long-standing burrow
- Dandelions everywhere
Pokey’s Place

- Shelter for wee ones
Pokey’s Place

Well-worn pathway along perimeter of property

Large fig tree gives grand shelter
Pokey's Place

Hatchling Pen—unused right now

Ramp admits small tortoises and blocks large ones
Tad’s Turf
Tad’s Turf

Grape branches trail on ground for easy eating

Grape trimmed from Tad’s walkway; nice resting place
Tad’s Turf

Globe mallow bent down or held in place with a rock

Tortoises bite and pull—need attached leaf
Tad’s Turf

Dandelion patch

Salad bar. Note that the Tad can’t reach the poisonous tomato leaves planted in a flower pot
This year I am eating dark-colored pansies

And yellow evening primrose
Tad’s Turf

Mexican evening primrose (right rear) can be contained and tipped on side for nibbling

Tad won’t eat the white petunias, only dark-colored ones
Desert willow (left) blossoms all season long—pick a handful daily

Shallow walk-in water feature (right)
My favorite red roses grow without pesticides in the front yard

Gardening equipment is blocked off
Chuck’s Chambers
Chuck’s Chambers

- Large yard with many areas of shade and sun
- Building projects blocked off by short temporary walls
Chuck’s Chambers

- Beautiful burrow
- Shaded water dish
  (They’ll cut my grass soon so I won’t choke on the long blades of grass)
Chuck’s Chambers

- Verbena and gazenias
- Hollyhocks
Chuck’s Chambers

- Spineless cactus in pot and yellow bells
- I love my new burrow!
Big & Runtley’s Realm
Mexican evening primrose

Future expansion, when Windsor block planter is restructured to avoid climbing
What Does a Habitat Need?

- The basic elements are very important
- No need to be fancy
- Include as much space as possible
- Must be outdoors
  - Well-insulated burrow
  - Water
  - Plants
  - Removable gate barrier
  - Tortoise-safe area
Happy Tortoises