

# Softshells

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Chinese Softshells



Chinese softshells (*Pelodiscus sinensis*) are the smallest species of softshell in the world, with the males reaching 7-9" SCL, and females reaching 8-10" SCL, plus their necks are around the same length as their bodies!

Males have longer tails and their cloaca is positioned further towards the end of the tail than in females. They also have slightly thicker tails, although this is not as noticeable as it is with other species.

Softshells are almost entirely aquatic, and are more than happy in deep water, even as hatchlings. A rough guide of 40L per inch SCL of turtle is advised, with at least 60L per inch of turtle EACH if they are to be housed with other turtle as they are so aggressive, although this is not advised. Soft shells are prone to injuries, and care should be taken to keep the tank free from sharp objects that could cause damage. A substrate of fine play sand deep enough for the turtle to bury itself completely is required to reduce stress, although this can be omitted.

Filtration and water quality is very important for softshells as they can be prone to fungus as well as infection, and a filter rated for at least twice the tank size is recommended. A small internal filter can also be added with activated carbon to keep the water extra clean and also to break the surface tension to prevent build up. Regular water testing and partial changes are important, as well as "vacuuming" of the tank to remove the larger mess. Be careful when choosing a filter and positioning the intake as if the sand gets into the filter, it can rapidly wear out the bearing. Larger filters tend to have metal or ceramic bearings and so will last longer, but as long as the intake is kept several inches above the level of the sand, this should not be a problem.

Softshells prefer slightly acidic water (pH 6.5), and a small amount of aquarium salt can be beneficial for helping to prevent skin and shell problems. Due to the limitations of decorating the tank, several good sized leafy plants can be added as these will provide resting and hiding places as well as helping to maintain water quality if they are live plants.

Although mostly aquatic, a basking area should still be provided with a good strong source of UVB such as a ReptiGlo 8.0 or 10.0 and a heat source to maintain a basking temp of 26-28C for around 12 hours a day. A floating Turtle Dock makes an ideal basking area, although something more substantial may be required for a large female, along with an area for laying to prevent her becoming egg-bound.

Softshells are almost exclusively carnivorous, eating a variety of fish, snails, crustaceans, and inverts as well as usually taking commercial pellets. They are excellent hunters and can easily deal with live feeders, and this means you can "gut load" crickets or mealworms to help introduce extra vitamins into the diet.

Handling is very definitely not recommended for softshells unless absolutely necessary as even ones that are hand fed can be VERY aggressive when handled, and will almost certainly try to bite the handler. Due to their long necks and speed, the best way to pick them up is to watch them bury into the sand and carefully pick them up from behind. Even small softshells can give a very nasty bite, and adults can take chunks out of fingers, so a lot of care should be taken to prevent injury to both the keeper as well as the turtle if it must be handled.