

[Send to printer](#) [Close window](#)

The Shell Game

New Orleanians and their turtles

CAROLYN KOLB



CHERYL GERBER PHOTOGRAPH

When asked if his pet red-footed tortoises came to him when they saw him, Dr. Stephen Derbes admits they did. “At first I thought it was personal – but it dawned on me. They just thought I was food. They would try to take a little nibble.”

It may be difficult to have a close, personal relationship with a turtle or tortoise, but they’re decorative to have in your yard. Derbes described his tortoises as being “a mixture of brown and black, with multi-colored heads with some yellow in them, and of course, little red feet with claws.”

All turtles and tortoises have no teeth, but they have well-developed senses of sight and smell and, apparently, some have good manners. Even when he took them to northern Mississippi to escape Katrina, Derbes’ tortoises were relatively well behaved on their car trip and at their vacation home.

McHardie Stoutz, from whom Derbes first acquired his red-footed pets, also has one of his own. The Stoutz home menagerie also includes a female box turtle, brought from the Stoutz place in Mississippi because she had a cracked shell that made her a prospective meal for raccoons. Stoutz, who once worked at Ott’s Pet shop on Magazine Street as a teenager, even has a box turtle in residence at his car dealership.

The difference between tortoises and turtles has much to do with where they live: tortoises live on land, turtles can live on land or in the water, either salt or fresh, and can have webbed feet. (A terrapin, another version of the reptile, lives only in fresh water.) All of them have an upper shell (carapace) and a lower shell (plastron).

Among the many varieties native to Louisiana, the gopher tortoise likes the sandy soil north of Lake Pontchartrain and lives in burrows. Deborah Conery once brought one in from across the lake and kept it in the city for a while.

Not all pet turtles are purchased. “If you’re driving in the country, on a back road, the box turtles in the springtime cross the road constantly. We used to pick them up,” Conery says. Her box turtles thrived in town. “I gave one to my daughter and it turned out to be pregnant, so she had turtles everywhere.”

"Very nice pets, very little care," Conery says of her turtles. However, she only named one: a box turtle was called Alpo "because he ate the dog's food."

Feeding tortoises can be problematic. Dr. Brobson Lutz (this magazine's "Health" columnist) had "Mary," an African Spurred Tortoise, in his French Quarter patio, and since the species can be large (up to 200 or so pounds), food had to come in large quantities.

"I used to go out to Dorignac's on weekends to get her wilted vegetables," Lutz explains. One day his usual contact didn't have the produce ready. While collecting it himself, he heard a woman calling: "Dr. Lutz, what are you doing in that dumpster? You're my mother's doctor!" Mary eventually left town and ended up in Philadelphia, where he turned out to be a male and was renamed "Bismarck."

Lutz now has a Mediterranean tortoise as well, who sometimes roams into the house, and a colony of box turtles, plus two western pond turtles in a fountain pond.

Many turtles and tortoises are protected species, and laws governing the sale of pet turtles keep the once-popular tiny ones off the market. Another problem turtles have is that they can carry salmonella bacteria.

Lutz advises: "Always wash your hands after handling a turtle – think what they've eaten and where they've been."

In spite of that, turtle is a mainstay on New Orleans menus.

If you eat turtle soup (Lutz does not), be aware that veal can be added or even substituted for turtle meat, and alligator can also be used in a turtle soup-like fashion. Louisiana's Best Seafood in Kenner might have turtle meat, and, at present, you can buy turtle meat frozen at Langenstein's Supermarket on Arabella Street, and frozen turtle soup is usually stocked at Chez Nous Charcuterie at Magazine Street at the corner of Arabella Street.

If you just want to watch turtles, try the Audubon Park lagoons: turtles like to bask on logs.