



## Box Turtle Sanctuary of Central Virginia

### Helping You Make Your Yard Turtle Friendly

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#### Why Box Turtles are good for your Garden, and How you can get them to be a regular visitor: February Preparations

Many Years ago, before the advent of common pesticides, Box Turtles were kept in gardens as a form of pest control. Our native Eastern Box Turtles are omnivorous and have evolved eating organic matter that many other animals could never eat. The Eastern Box Turtle is sometimes even considered the only poisonous turtle in the world due to its ability to eat and process toxic mushrooms that are lethal to most. So if your garden has a good supply of decomposing plants that feed bugs, insects and slugs, you have a turtle buffet!



## **How to Create a Turtle Hide-a-way with your yard Debris**

Mother Winter often leaves our yards littered with offerings from the trees. So far this winter at the sanctuary, we have lost a few small trees and shrubs due to Ice and snow damage, and although it is messy and time consuming to clean up and replant, winter damage is a natural and beneficial process for both the plants and the critters that use them for shelter and food. Cold Weather damage to plants have two basic causes:

- native plants have gotten weak from insects, disease or to much fast growth.
- non-native plants are not prepared for our winter.

Although February weather is not conducive to replacing damaged winter plants, it is a good time to clean up the debris, and begin planning native alternatives for wildlife in your yard.

### **Here's What you can do Now**

- Locate an area along the border, in the tree line, or in a corner of your yard where you can build and leave a pile of your yard debris.
- Create a pile of sticks and branches and intersperse with leaves, soil, and compost,
- DO NOT USE soil with additives like fertilizers and weed controllers, and do not place any non-native invasive plants that may root or seed into your pile.

### **Here's What you can expect**

- Moisture in the leaves will attract insects which will begin decomposition, creating warmth.
- Sticks and branches will begin to rot as they are consumed by moisture and insects, your pile will begin to shrink.
- Insect eating birds, reptiles and amphibians will begin to visit your pile, eating insects, and further encouraging decomposition..
- The shelter and protection from predators and the elements that is created by your pile of debris will keep your new wildlife visitors returning, and create a new hot-spot of wildlife diversity for you to enjoy.



**In Case you missed it:**

I was fortunate to be interviewed by Melissa for this article in Richmond.com Magazine...

## Boxed In

The besieged Eastern box turtle finds a passionate defender in Shelley Whittington

by [Melissa Scott Sinclair](#)

richmondmag.com

January 28, 2018

It happened for the hundredth time on Farrington Road.

Shelley Whittington saw a box turtle doggedly trudging across the asphalt, and she pulled over to help it. As a red Mustang sped toward her, she waved her arms. The car slowed — after smashing the little creature to pieces.

“The turtle!” she cried.

The Mustang driver looked at her. “What turtle?” he said.

Whittington wept all the way home.

That’s the tragedy, she says. We don’t see what we destroy.

Whittington has watched Hanover County grow and grow over the last 35 years: roads widened, trees felled, houses rising. And she has watched the turtles vanish.



### Educational Opportunities for 2018

**As an Advocate for Turtles,  
Educational programs are  
created around their schedule..**

**Programs are limited!  
Book Yours Today!**

**Turtle Parties are a  
Great Educational  
Ohh and Ahhh Moment for  
Kids of All Ages!**

***\*NEW for 2018***

**Turtles from around the World!  
Meet Sully!**

**Learn about turtles and their Habitats!  
How their shell can help you tell where they  
live and what they eat!**

“It pains me. When I see trees being destroyed, I feel the pain — it’s the most bizarre thing, but I feel it,” she says. When land is cleared, people don’t think about what happens to the humble animals on the forest floor: “The deer hop away, the bunnies hop away, and the turtles [say] ‘I’m gonna wait!’ ”

The Eastern box turtle, an ancient terrestrial species, has a near-unbreakable connection to its home range, even after a subdivision swallows the woods. Once removed, a turtle may spend the rest of its life searching for that place again — but if left there, it may starve in the sterile environment of fenced lawns, or be unable to find a mate.

One Thanksgiving weekend several years ago, Whittington found a turtle at the entrance of a newly built neighborhood in Hanover. It should have been hibernating, but was underweight and ailing. She brought it home to her farm, where it still lives today.

That was the beginning of her mission. She decided she would become a voice, and eventually a sanctuary, for the turtles of Central Virginia.

With live turtles, puppets, shells, bones and sometimes paint, she began teaching schoolchildren and adults. She tells them how box turtles can live up to a century. How their shells grow smoother and brighter over time, as years of burrowing polish the ridged scutes (bony plates). How the shell is a living and permanent part of a turtle’s body — not something cast aside like a hermit crab’s shell, as one misguided forester once told her.

Education is crucial, she says, because “the only stronghold turtles have is private property.” If people understand turtles’ needs, and the urgency of protecting them, they can create habitats in wooded back yards and farms.

“If you look at a map, from Richmond on up to D.C., there are no preserved areas,” Whittington says. Counties like Henrico and Hanover must act to preserve large tracts of woodland, she says, before growth makes it impossible.



## All Boxed In

Explore a year in the life of An Eastern Box Turtle. Discover how they survived the days of the dinosaurs and became one of Virginia oldest residents. And Learn how you can encourage these ancient reptiles to visit your yard and keep them coming back.



An Eastern box turtle (Photo courtesy Shelley Whittington)

[Laws protecting turtles in the wild](#) are scant. It's illegal to sell any native turtle species in Virginia, but they may be given away and kept as pets (up to five per species), or hunted. A team of researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University reported recently that [the state's snapping turtles are being overharvested](#), as males are butchered for meat and females shipped to breeding operations in China.

Virginia does have strict rules governing the fate of wild turtles who spend time in captivity. Wildlife rehabilitators must release turtles exactly where they were found, even if their habitat has been destroyed, and they can't release an animal if it has been kept for more than 30 days. They also aren't supposed to release wild animals that may not be able to thrive on their own. So if a box turtle has lost a limb, or its shell has been so damaged that it can't fully close, it may be euthanized.

That's not right, Whittington says. If humans are responsible for injuring these turtles, she says, we should also ensure they have someplace to live. And turtles have astonishing regenerative abilities — when given time and care, they can heal from amputations or fractured shells and survive.

That's why Whittington is working to create a



### Hibernation or Brumation? What's the Difference?

Although many people, including turtle keepers, refer to the winter dormancy period of all animals as hibernation, the truth is they are two quite different metabolic processes

**Hibernation** is a state of winter dormancy in which animals (usually mammals) do not eat or drink and are able to lower their metabolism to expend a minimal amount of energy.

**Brumation** is a term that refers to cool-blooded or ectothermic reptiles, and is physiologically different in that when the external temperatures drop, so does the turtles body temperature. This drop in body temperature limits the turtles functionality and causes him to seek shelter until warmed by the sun.



sanctuary on her farm to care for turtles that cannot survive in the wild, as well as take in pet turtles and tortoises from abusive or inadequate homes.

On her 20-acre farm, she's constructing two half-acre pens — one for male box turtles, one for females — that are fenced and secured with metal flashing that's planted deep in the earth. Before being accredited as a sanctuary, she must complete the fencing, as well as a system to identify and keep records on individual turtles. Every box turtle shell has 13 scutes with unique, contrasting patterns. Whittington hopes to develop a shell-identification app that can track turtles by these patterns, both at the sanctuary and in the wild.



*Whittington with Sully, a sulcata tortoise (Photo by Jay Paul)*

Whittington already has a few native turtles she uses for her educational programs, as well as some pets that have come from negligent or inadequate homes. One of these is Sully, an enormous sulcata tortoise with studded front legs and inquisitive black eyes. He had been kept in a dry, bare greenhouse after outgrowing his quarters.

Whittington's ultimate goal, she says, is to be "the Maymont of turtles": a place where kids can see turtles in a natural habitat and meet them face to face. It'll take time and money; right now, the nonprofit is largely funded by the fees Whittington receives for her educational programs. But she's determined to try.

In 250 million years, she says, "they've survived everything. Now, will they survive us? That's the question."

*Want to help? The Box Turtle Sanctuary of Central Virginia is looking for volunteers to*

## **THANK YOU UofR School of Law**

Thanks to our Student Attorney from the University of Richmond School of Law Intellectual Property & Transactional Law Clinic, We now have official volunteer and release forms and are busy scheduling our first Volunteer day for Saturday May 26, 2018! **MARK YOUR CALENDARS NOW! AND WATCH FOR MORE INFORMATION!**



*assist with the fencing, as well as donations of flashing and other materials, and the development of the shell identification app. [Learn more.](#)*

## **We Are Growing and need your help.**

Do you have Questions, suggestions or comments? Do you know someone that loves turtles? Are you interested in learning how you can help? Please share or drop me an e-mail!