



Basic Bearded Dragon Care

Natural History

Native to the Australian desert, bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) are members of the family Agama that includes frilled dragons and Asian water dragons. The bearded dragon's name comes from its practice of extending the flap of skin under the jaw or "beard" in a defensive posture.

Size and Lifespan

Bearded dragons commonly attain a length of 2 feet (including the tail). Males tend to grow larger than females and have larger heads. Bearded dragons typically live 8-10 years. Sexual maturity is reached between 8-18 months, although sexual activity may begin before 12 months of age.

Caging Tips

A 20-gallon glass aquarium may suffice for young dragons, however juveniles will rapidly outgrow such an enclosure. An adult bearded dragon minimally requires a 75-gallon (238 L) aquarium although a larger enclosure (4'x2'x2') is recommended. A screen top is recommended to allow proper ventilation, prevent escape and protect your dragon from other pets. Bearded dragons require hiding areas (rock cave, plant pot, etc.) as well as thick branches upon which to climb and bask. Branches must be sturdy enough to support heavy-bodied adults. You can also use slate rock to build a basking platform. Live plants such as aloe and palms can be added to the enclosure. Artificial plants are easily disinfected and make appropriate accessories. Most beardies will utilize a half-log hiding area.

The cage substrate must be easily cleaned and non-toxic. Tile flooring is a great option that is easy to clean and naturally wears down their nails. Reptile-carpet is also an okay option. If you use reptile carpet, the stuff that looks and feels like grass is the best. The felt kind has little loops of fabric that may catch your dragon's nails and cause injury. DO NOT use sand, shavings, or any other loose substrate for beardies. They can be very clumsy eaters, and they are also very curious and like to taste everything. Any loose substrate holds serious health risks to your beardie. If they eat a loose substrate, they can become impacted, which blocks the intestines and die.

Lighting and Temperature

The temperature for bearded dragons during the day should be around 80-85 degrees Fahrenheit and drops to 75 degrees Fahrenheit at night. The basking site should be around 88-95 F. Two thermometers should be used in the cage. One placed at the level of the basking site and the other on the cool end of the tank an inch above the substrate. Hot rocks are NOT recommended since serious burns may arise secondary to short circuits.

Basking Temp	92-95°F
Ambient Temp	80-88°F
Nighttime Temp	70-75°F

Like all reptiles, you should also provide 12 hours of UVB lighting during the day and off at night. This UVB lighting is important as it assists them in synthesizing vitamin D3, which aids in dietary calcium absorption. UVB bulbs must be changed every 6 months, regardless of if they are burned out. Without the use of proper lighting, they can develop abnormal bone growth and Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD). Bearded dragons will require 10.0 strength UVB lights. A linear UVB light, spanning the length of the tank is recommended.

****Brumation should never occur in captive reptiles unless you and your vet have planned to artificially lower your pets' temperature and metabolism. Only do this with your veterinarian's guidance!

Humidity

The humidity in the cage should be maintained between 40 and 60%. This can be achieved by placing a water dish in the enclosure, preferably one the lizard can soak in, and misting 2-3 times a week. A hygrometer is highly recommended.

Diet

Bearded dragons are omnivores (they eat plant and animal matter) that accept a wide variety of foods. Variety is the key to good nutrition. A bearded dragon's diet requirements change as they get older. The chart below shows what a beardies diet should consist of based on their age.

Age	Frequency	Vegetable Matter	Animal/Insect Matter
Hatchling - 2 months	2-3 times daily	20% (once daily)	80% (twice daily)
2 months - 4 months	Twice daily	40% (once daily)	60% (once daily)
4 months – 1 year	Once daily	50%-60%	40%-50%
Adult	Every 1-2 days	80%	20%

Vegetable matter should be offered as a finely chopped salad and should include dark leafy greens such as collard, turnip, dandelion and mustard greens. Romaine lettuce and Bok choy are also great options. Also offer chopped or grated carrots, squash, zucchini, sweet potato, green beans and bell peppers. Fruits such as strawberries, blueberries, melon, papaya and banana can also be fed sparingly as treats. There are a few foods that should be avoided as they are toxic to bearded dragons and that includes avocado, rhubarb, onion and citrus fruits. Spinach also is not a suitable food source.

Insects should be sized appropriately and are to be slightly smaller than the size of the beardies head. All insects need to be gut-loaded for at least 24 hours before feeding them to your dragon! (Refer to the gut-loading handout) Dubia roaches are the most nutritionally complete but adding a variety of dubia roaches, crickets, grasshoppers and black soldier fly larvae is ideal. Mealworms, wax worms, hornworms and super worms should be fed sparingly as treats. Do not offer any wild caught bugs and most especially lightning bugs as they are extremely toxic to bearded dragons.

Vitamin and Mineral Supplement

Bearded dragons will require calcium supplements without phosphorous. Juvenile beardies should have their insects and salad dusted daily and a multi-vitamin can be added twice weekly. Bearded dragons from 6 months to a year of age should have calcium every feeding and multi-vitamin once weekly. Adults (1 year and older) should have calcium on all insects but otherwise every 2-3 days and multi-vitamin every other week.

Water

There is a common misconception about bearded dragons that they shouldn't have water bowls because they don't readily drink water from bowls/can't see standing water. Or you may have heard that water shouldn't be provided because it will make the humidity "too high". Both are false. Part of good reptile husbandry is making sure that your pet has free access to clean drinking water. Dehydration is a major problem in bearded dragons and giving them a water bowl helps prevent that. Use a medium-sized, shallow water dish that is large enough for them to soak in but not too deep. You can also mist the greens before feeding them to add extra hydration.

Handling and Temperament

When you first bring your beardie home, resist the temptation to immediately start cuddling him/her. It is recommended to let your dragon settle in for 2 weeks before handling. After 2 weeks of getting used to their new home you can start offering their favorite foods by hand to get them used to you approaching them. Once they are used to you, you can start handling them! They like to feel supported so make sure to support all four feet, so they don't feel off balance.