

# HOW TO KEEP YOUR BEARDED DRAGON HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE!

## Always:

- Wash your hands after handling your bearded dragon or cleaning the enclosure.
- Quarantine new dragons in a separate area of the house for 3-6 months.
- Housing dragons together should be avoided to prevent trauma from fighting. If dragons are being kept in the same enclosure they must be of similar size and have plenty of space available, including multiple feeding stations.
- Monitor individuals regularly when multiple dragons are housed together for signs of decreased condition or traumatic injuries.
- Ensure a gradient of temperatures in their enclosure, from 77 degrees F (25 degrees C) on the cool side to 90 degrees F (32 degrees C) on the warm side with a hot basking spot of around 100 degrees F (38 degrees C). At night, the temperature should drop no lower than mid 70 degrees F (23-24 degrees C).
- Provide captive bearded dragons with approximately 12 hours of UVB lighting in their enclosures each day. Talk to your reptile veterinarian for the best current recommendations in UV bulbs. Fluorescent UVB bulbs should be replaced every 6 months to ensure proper UVB output. It is ideal to provide direct sunlight when possible (note that UVB rays are blocked by glass or plexiglass).
- Allow supervised time outdoors to bask when the temperature is above 70°F (20°C) (only in secure enclosures that will not overheat with access to shade and water).
- Consult with your exotic animal veterinarian about supplementation of calcium and vitamins (generally should include regular calcium carbonate with mixed vitamins every 1-2 weeks).

## Housing for your bearded dragon should:

- be spacious and easy to clean, with smooth sides to prevent rostral (nose) abrasions
- be the size of a 10-gallon tank for a baby dragon; adults need large enclosures that have a square footage of at least four times the length of the bearded dragon [a 2 foot (60 cm) long dragon would need an enclosure of at least 4 x 2 ft (1.2 x 0.6 m)]
- be large enough for climbing, exploration, basking
- contain thick climbing branches or rocks to support heavy-bodied dragons
- have access to food and water containers for frequent cleaning
- provide a hiding area, such as a cardboard box or clay plant pot
- include non-particulate substrates such as reptile carpet (consult with your exotic animal veterinarian about other substrate recommendations for adults)
- dragon babies <6 months old should be housed on paper towels.

## It is important to avoid:

- gravel, corn cob bedding, sand (including calcium sand), walnut shells, kitty litter, alfalfa pellets or wood shavings as substrates (to avoid possible gastrointestinal impaction)
- potentially toxic live plants
- free roam of the house (to prevent chilling, trauma, ingestion of foreign materials and escape)
- shared housing between adults and hatchlings, as adults may eat or traumatize hatchlings
- shared housing between any two or more dragons of different sizes
- potential for direct contact with heating elements (including hot rocks)
- over-supplementation of vitamins or minerals
- feeding lightning bugs (which are toxic) or wild insects that might contain insecticide toxins

## Additional Reading:

The Bearded Dragon Manual, P. de Vosjoli  
 Bearded Dragons: A Complete Guide to *Pogona vitticeps*, P. Purser  
 Lizards, Volume 1, M. Rogner  
 Keeping and Breeding Lizards, C. Mattison  
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## Bearded Dragons

Bearded dragons are native to inland Australia, where they have adapted well to life in a warm, dry environment. Free-ranging bearded dragons are omnivorous, consuming a variety of animal and plant items.

The most common pet dragon is the inland bearded dragon, *Pogona vitticeps*. These fascinating reptiles are fast becoming the most popular

lizard in the pet industry because of their ease of maintenance, placid disposition, friendly personality, hardiness and fierce appearance.

Bearded dragons maintain a moderate size and enjoy life in captivity as a family pet. Bearded dragons offered for sale are the result of multi-generational breeding in captivity. Several color and pattern varieties are available.

Following purchase, a dragon should be taken to a reptile veterinarian for a general health check and a fecal exam for parasites.

### What to Expect from Your Bearded Dragon:

Bearded dragons are suitable pets for children because these lizards rarely bite, scratch or whip with their tails. They genuinely respond to gentle handling and will look you in the eye, eat from your hand and rest in your lap. A dragon should not be caught or lifted by its tail; its body should be fully supported when it is being held or carried.

### Salmonella:

Most, if not all, reptiles carry Salmonella bacteria in their intestinal tract and intermittently or continuously shed these bacteria in their feces, so they are unsuitable pets for very young children and those with compromised immune systems. Good hygiene must always be practiced around all reptiles, including bearded dragons. For more information, please see the handout, *Salmonella Information for Reptile Owners* at <http://arav.org/special-topics/>.

### Is Your Dragon a Male or a Female?

It is important to know the gender of your pet in order to watch for and prevent potential problems with egg laying in the female. A mature female bearded dragon should be examined by an exotic animal veterinarian at least yearly.

In the juvenile stage, there is little difference between male and female bearded dragons. As they approach adult size, the male begins to develop a broader head, and its large black "beard" becomes apparent in the breeding season. Males also have a thicker tail base, prominent femoral pores along their inner thighs, and a wider cloacal opening. Behavioral differences may be observed, but these are not always conclusive for sexing bearded dragons.

### What Should You Feed Your Dragon?

In captivity, both live prey and salads should be offered to provide a balanced diet for your dragon. Because dragons are active during the day, they should be fed in the morning.

- The dragon's live prey may consist of appropriately sized crickets, superworms, hornworms, and roaches. More fatty foods such as wax worms may be fed on occasion. The prey should be gut loaded: fed balanced diets, including commercial gut load diets mixed with fresh greens and vegetables, for several days

before feeding out. Prey should also be "dusted" with a calcium carbonate powder (without phosphorous or vitamins) daily, and

weekly with a vitamin-mineral supplement.

- Salads may consist of chopped mixes of a variety of greens, such as romaine, dandelion greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, bok choy, collard greens, kale, and arugula. Greens that are high in oxalates, such as spinach (and to a lesser degree swiss chard and escarole), should be only fed on rare occasions, as the oxalates bind with calcium in the meal.
- Vegetables may comprise up to 20% of the diet and can include squash, zucchini, sweet potato, broccoli, peas, beans, okra and grated carrot. Fruits may make up about 2-5% of the diet and may include papaya, melon, strawberries, blueberries, and banana.
- Avoid feeding your dragon commercial diets designed for other animals, such as dog or cat food. Pellet diets and dried food mixes should also be avoided as a sole diet source as they can lead to nutritional imbalance and dehydration.

### Feeding Schedule and Content:

- Baby bearded dragons are fed small meals two to three times daily and tend to eat primarily small moving prey, such as one- to two-week-old crickets. As a general rule, dragons are fed crickets with a body length no greater than 1/2 to 2/3 the width of the dragon's head (a rule of thumb is no longer than the distance between the beardie's eyes). Salads should be introduced at this early age so the dragons are accustomed to eating greens and vegetables as they mature. As the dragon grows, the size of live prey increases and intake of salads increases.
- Juvenile bearded dragons grow rapidly and need plenty of food offered daily. Hungry juveniles housed together will nip the toes and tail-tips of their cagemates.
- Adult bearded dragons should be fed salad and vegetables daily (70-80% salad greens, 20-30% vegetables, 2-5% fruit) and live prey 3-4 times per week.
- Live prey should comprise approximately 25% of the daily diet on days when prey is offered.

### Water:

- Bearded dragons thrive at humidity levels of 40-60%. Obtain a hygrometer to measure the tank humidity. Drinking water should be provided at all times in a dish that allows soaking. Water can be supplemented by twice weekly soaks in warm, shallow water.

### Most Common Disorders of Bearded Dragons:

- Impaction
- Intestinal parasites
- Decreased appetite and weight loss secondary to improper husbandry (including low temperatures, inappropriate light cycle, inadequate UVB exposure, lack of calcium supplementation)
- Gastroenteritis from bacteria, viruses or parasites
- Hypocalcemia and associated bone/muscle disorders from deficiency of calcium and/or vitamin D3
- Trauma: burns from cage heating devices and bulbs, fractures (due in part to malnutrition), wounds inflicted by other animals
- Dystocia, egg-binding
- Cloacal prolapse

Bearded dragons can flourish as long-lived pets when attention is given to their husbandry, including temperature, diet and exposure ultraviolet-B (UVB) light. Contact your veterinarian if you notice reduced growth, poor appetite, depression, swelling of the bones in the face and legs, loss of weight, regurgitation, fractures, spasms, convulsions, or difficulty in walking, climbing or chewing food.

Regular visits to your reptile veterinarian are important to promote a long, satisfying relationship with your bearded dragon. As soon as a bearded dragon has been acquired, it should be taken to a reptile veterinarian for a general health check, husbandry assessment, and to check for parasites. For help in finding a reptile veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (ARAV) by visiting [www.ARAV.org](http://www.ARAV.org) and click on "Find a Vet" or contact the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners by visiting [www.ABVP.com/diplomate](http://www.ABVP.com/diplomate).



### Vital Statistics

- Length:** 18-24 inches (45-60 cm)
- Age of sexual maturity:** 1-2 years
- Length at sexual maturity:** 12-16 inches (30-40 cm)
- Average weight:** 283-510 g
- Life span:** 10 years



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