

Care of the Australian Bearded Dragon

Native to the Australian desert, bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) are members of the family Agama that includes frilled dragons (*Chlamydosaurus kingii*) and Asian water dragons (*Hydrosaurus amboinensis*).

Bearded dragons commonly attain a length of 2 feet (including the tail). Males tend to grow larger than females and have larger heads. The bearded dragon's name comes from its practice of extending the flap of skin under the jaw or "beard" in a defensive posture. 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.

DIET

Bearded dragons are omnivores that accept a wide variety of foods. Variety is the key to good nutrition and foods offered should include:

- Vegetable matter, offered as a chopped salad, should make up approximately 50-55% of the adult dragon diet.
 - Dark leafy greens (such as collard greens, kale, romaine, dandelion, turnip greens, mustard greens, beet greens, bok choy, Swiss chard, spinach, chicory, escarole)
 - Other chopped or grated vegetables may comprise up to 20% of the diet (squash, zucchini, sweet potato, broccoli, peas, carrot, beans, okra, bean sprouts, tofu)
- Animal matter should make up approximately 25% of the adult dragon diet.
 - Appropriately sized crickets (body length no greater than the width of the dragon's head), earthworms, grasshoppers, superworms (*Zophobas*), wax worms, locusts
 - Pinky mice
 - Avoid lightning bugs, as they can be toxic.
- Fruit should make up no more than 5% of the diet and should include nutrient dense items such as papaya, melon, and banana.
- Offer non-toxic flower blossoms such as hibiscus as occasional treats.

Suggested Feeding Schedules

<1 month old:	Feed 2-3 times daily (crickets, vegetable matter)
1-4 months old:	Feed twice daily (crickets, veggies, occasional mealworm)
4 months to adult:	Feed once daily (crickets, mealworms, pinky mice, salad every other day)
Adult:	Feed every 1-2 days (crickets, vegetables); pinky or fuzzy mouse once weekly

Vitamin-Mineral Supplementation

Bearded dragons require vitamin/mineral supplementation.

- Lightly dust all food items with a calcium carbonate or calcium gluconate supplement (**without** phosphorus or vitamin D).
- Dust prey for baby bearded dragons daily. The frequency of dusting should decrease as your dragon ages so that by adulthood prey are dusted once weekly.
- Any easy and thorough way to dust food items is to place both food and supplement in a plastic bag and shake vigorously.
- When feeding live insects be sure to offer “gut loaded” insects or insect prey fed high calcium diets for several days before being. This calcium-rich diet may include fresh greens or commercial cricket diets.
- Offer a reptile multi-vitamin approximately once monthly.

Water

Although bearded dragons thrive in low humidity environments, drinking water should always be provided in a shallow bowl or saucer. Dragons will often soak and defecate in their water bowl so clean water dishes at least once daily.

HOUSING

Bearded dragons may be housed in small groups of one male and a few females. Dragons housed together should be of similar size with plenty of space available.

Enclosure

- A 10-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 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, cardboard box, etc.) as well as thick branches upon which to climb and bask. Branches must be sturdy enough to support heavy-bodied adults.
- The cage substrate must be easily cleaned and non-toxic.
 - Use newspaper or butcher paper to line the cage floor.
 - Astroturf is fine as long as it is kept clean and dry.
 - Avoid sand, gravel or corncob bedding because they may cause gastrointestinal blockage if ingested.

Heat

Proper temperature is very important. The daytime cage temperature gradient should range from 80-88°F (27-31°C), with a basking (hot) spot around 92-95°F (33-35°C).

- The basking area should consist of an overhead heat lamp and a branch that slopes upward so that the animal can select its desired temperature. Take care that the bulb cannot come in contact with your dragon.
- Floor heat may be provided by a number of methods including under-tank floor mats.
- Hot rocks are NOT recommended since serious burns may arise secondary to short circuits. Place thermometers at both ends of the cage. Place the thermometers at levels consistent with where your dragon spends most of its time.

Lighting

Ultraviolet light is needed for normal absorption of dietary calcium.

- Provide a synthetic ultraviolet light source for your bearded dragon. Be sure to choose a bulb specifically designed for reptile use that emits light in the UVB range of 290-320 nm.
- Ultraviolet rays are filtered by glass and plastic therefore natural light and artificial light must not pass through glass or plastic.
- The UVB spectrum generally degrades after about 6 months; therefore bulbs should be replaced every 6 months.

Consider exposing your pet to direct sunlight when outside temperatures exceed 75-80°F (24-27°C). Keep your dragon in a wire or screened enclosure that provides a shaded area. Monitor your pet closely since overheating is a danger in the hot summer sun.

Cage furniture

- Bearded dragons require hiding areas such as rock cave, plant pot or cardboard box,.
- Provide sturdy branches for climbing and basking.

Quarantine

House new dragons in a separate area of the house for at least 1 month (3-6 months is preferable). Always feed and clean new dragons last.

COMMON DISEASES

- Coccidiosis is a parasitic infection of the small intestine, which may lead to diarrhea, lethargy, poor appetite and dehydration in the young dragon.
- Metabolic bone disease, a deficiency of calcium, ultraviolet light, and/or vitamin D₃, can lead to numerous problems including poor bone quality and fractures.
- Female dragons often produce eggs, even without the presence of a male. Although it is normal for a gravid female to eat very little—if at all—signs of egg binding may include lethargy, depression and straining.