



Bearded Dragons

Scientific Name: *Pogona vitticeps*

Written by Dr. Scott Medlin

Bearded Dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) originate from the arid, inland desert terrain of Australia. In the wild, they can be found in the shrubs and lightly wooded areas of the desert environment, basking in the sun or in an underground burrow to cool off.

Bearded dragons can live up to 8-12 years. Bearded dragons are typically docile in nature and are often gregarious for a reptile, making them an especially good choice for a pet. Bearded dragons are extremely common in the reptile trade, and are generally hardy in nature.

Enclosure: Bearded dragons should always be housed alone. While there are many fun and interesting ways to custom-build an appropriate enclosure for your bearded dragon, one of the simplest ways to house them is in a glass terrarium. Terrariums are easy to find, easy to clean, and easy to keep heated. The size of the tank you choose for your bearded dragon can depend on its age and size. For example, a baby bearded dragon fits comfortably in a 20 gallon terrarium, but an adult bearded dragon should be housed in a 40 gallon breeder tank or larger enclosure. If your bearded dragon has enough space to run around, climb, and have both a hot and cold spot in its enclosure, it will have lower stress and run into fewer health problems. Provide your bearded dragon with an adequate shelter to retreat to at night time. You will also need some type of secure ornament or climbing branch that slopes upwards, allowing your bearded dragon to move up and down to regulate its exposure to heat and light while it basks.

Substrate: We do not recommend that you use sand in your bearded dragon's enclosure. Additionally, walnut bedding, coconut fiber, or any other loose substrate inside your bearded dragon's cage can potentially cause problems. If your bearded dragon eats some of its bedding, it may create a blockage in its digestive tract. Instead, we recommend using reptile carpet, tile, newspaper, or even paper towels. These are all easy to clean and replace each time your bearded dragon makes a mess!

Heat/Lighting: Bearded dragons need specialized lighting in order to thrive in captivity. The first element of the necessary lighting is heat. The light fixture and appropriate heat bulb can be purchased at your local pet store. You also need to purchase a digital thermometer that reads the temperature of the basking area below your bearded dragon's heat bulb. Bearded dragons should have access to a basking area that reaches 100-105°F. Under tank heat may be used, but should be regulated by means of a thermostat/rheostat to prevent burns.

UVB: The second element of your bearded dragon's lighting system is UVB. The presence of UV rays in the enclosure is important for your pet's ability to process the calcium it extracts from its diet. In their natural environment, bearded dragons bask in the desert sun and receive sufficient amounts of UV rays throughout the day. In captivity, it is necessary to replicate the sun's rays. This can be achieved through purchasing a UVB bulb. The type of UVB bulb you purchase depends largely on your setup and the height of your bearded dragon's basking spot, but a 40 gallon breeder aquarium typically requires a 10.0



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UVB bulb. If you are unsure of whether your UV light is sufficient, we recommend using a UV meter to get an accurate reading of your UVB bulb's output. A lack of sufficient UVB lighting can result in severe calcium deficiencies that could be life-threatening and/or create life-long disabilities and deformities. Moreover, most UVB bulbs need to be replaced every 6 months to guarantee that they are still providing enough UV rays for your pet's health. If you choose to purchase a mercury vapor bulb, this should be replaced every 1 year.

Diet: The recommended diet for your bearded dragon will vary depending on its age. When feeding insects, you should always feed your bearded dragon in a separate container from its cage. Leaving crickets in your bearded dragon's enclosure does not allow you to measure how much your pet is eating, and the crickets may also cause your pet harm. If you are able to get your bearded dragon to take a pelleted diet, well, you will greatly increase its nutritional plane.

Baby bearded dragons will require a regimen that focuses primarily on nutrition derived from insects. Pinhead-sized crickets are an excellent choice for baby bearded dragons. Crickets are easy to feed and "gut load" with vitamins and minerals that your bearded dragon needs. Although crickets do not have an excellent calcium-phosphorous ratio (which is important when considering your bearded dragon's calcium needs), this is easily corrected by using a high-quality calcium dust just before offering them. It is recommended that you feed your baby bearded dragon daily.

Juvenile bearded dragons should also have insects serve as a partial portion of the diet. The size of crickets you offer should never be larger than the width of your bearded dragon's head. You may also offer an occasional worm (mealworms, hornworms, silkworms, etc). Juvenile bearded dragons may also eat a variety of high-calcium greens, such as kale, watercress, collard greens, mustard greens, and endive. Many of these greens are also rich in Vitamin A, another important element of a well-balanced diet for your pet. It is also recommended that you include a pelleted diet a few times per week.

As your bearded dragon grows into an adult, the proportion of insects versus greens begins to change. You should include more high-calcium greens in your bearded dragon's diet as they grow older. Insects should be occasional to avoid the possibility of causing obesity. You should still offer a pelleted diet a few times per week to your adult bearded dragon. Certain vegetables can be a healthy snack, such as squash, zucchini, and red bell pepper. You can offer the occasional piece of fruit as well, although it is not necessary. It is also important to note that as you are alternating the type of food you offer to your dragon, your pet may not eat every day.

Calcium-dusting the food you offer to your bearded dragon, regardless of age, is very important. We recommend that you sprinkle your bearded dragon's food with calcium powder approximately 75% of the time. In addition, a vitamin powder with Vitamin A, such as Zoo Med's Reptivite, should be used every two weeks.



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Bathing: Soaking your bearded dragon will ensure that it stays hydrated; they don't typically drink by themselves out of a bowl. A 10-minute soak in mildly warm water once per week is sufficient. Some bearded dragons will pass stool while they are soaking – this is normal! When your bearded dragon is done soaking, be sure to place them back in a warm spot in their cage.