



Introduction to Bearded Dragon Care

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Bearded Dragons, affectionately known as "beardies", are fast becoming popular pets. These lizards are native to Australia and are accustomed to dry, warm days and slightly cooler nights. They enjoy climbing rocks and basking in the sun.

Housing

As a general rule, the more space for your bearded dragon, the better. At a minimum, you will need an enclosure that is at least twice the length of your beardie (from the tip of her nose to the tip of her tail). The width should be, at minimum, 1 length of your beardie from nose to tail. Your beardie should be able to exercise and turn around completely without bumping into the cage. You must consider that a full-grown beardie can grow up to two feet in length, and a healthy beardie will grow quickly. She will nearly reach adult size in less than 6 months! It is best to purchase an enclosure suitable for an adult beardie at the onset.

The ease of cleaning your beardie's enclosure is another important consideration. The enclosure should have a solid bottom and be constructed of glass, hard plastic, or stainless steel which are easiest to clean. Regular cage cleaning is very important. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least once a week. You can use a mild soap solution for cleaning and then disinfect with a mixture of 1 capful bleach to 1 gallon of water. The cage needs to be RINSED WELL and dried thoroughly before your beardie is returned to the enclosure. Your local pet store may also carry disinfectant products designed for reptiles.

Props are very important for the well-being of your bearded dragon. Logs, rocks, and plants (real or artificial) provide spaces to exercise and hide. It is very stressful for a beardie when they have no place to hide. Re-arrange the props in the enclosure often so your beardie does not get bored. It's important to clean all props and decorations on a regular basis.



Heat & Lighting

Beardies under 6 months of age require a slightly higher basking temperature between 95–110 degrees Fahrenheit. Juveniles and adults should have a slightly cooler basking area of 90–100 degrees. The basking temperature should be measured in the area closest to the heat bulb that your beardedie has access to (i.e. a branch). The warm side of the tank should be in the mid-high 80s, with the cooler areas in the high 70s to low 80s. They should have a shallow water dish as an option for moisture but note that beardies have a natural aversion to standing water. They get most of their moisture through their diet.

Your beardedie should have access to UVA/UVB light for 10–12 hours per day, all year long. Beardies that do not get the amount of UV light they need lose bone density and become susceptible to fractures (similar to osteoporosis in humans).

Natural sunlight, when available, is the preferred source of UV light. Window and aquarium glass will filter out most of the beneficial sunlight. During warm weather, you can place the cage or aquarium (with a screen top) by an opened window or in a safe place outside for a portion of the day. Your beardedie should always have access to a shaded area if she chooses. Providing your beardedie with both warm and cool areas in the enclosure will allow her to effectively regulate her body temperature. This is crucial for all reptiles, as they cannot regulate their own body temperature.

Use ultraviolet light that emits both UVA and UVB rays year-round. These bulbs will stop emitting the necessary UV rays long before the bulb itself will burn out. You need to change the UV bulbs at least every 6 months. Date your bulbs and change them at least every 6 months even if they are still emitting visible light. Note that fluorescent UV lights do not produce heat and must be used in addition to a heat source. Any lights should be placed where your beardedie cannot climb or come into contact with them.

Bedding

Two recommended bedding materials include reptile carpeting and newspaper. These products are easy to find, clean, safe, and inexpensive. Reptile carpeting can be washed and reused. Although corncob, wood shavings, sand, and gravel are commonly used as bedding material, we DO NOT recommend them. These materials can be ingested by your beardedie, which may result in impaction and may require surgical removal. Additionally, bacteria and fungi can grow in these materials, and their dust can irritate the eyes and respiratory system. Not to mention, these materials are also difficult to clean.

Diet

In the wild, bearded dragons eat both insects and plant material. They should be raised on live insects, such as crickets, mealworms, or wax worms, as well as vegetables. Feed juveniles live prey twice daily for 10 minutes. Adults should eat live prey once daily or every other day. The crickets you purchase should be "gut-loaded" with calcium. Most crickets are sold this way, but if your pet store does not "gut-load" their crickets for you, you can purchase an insect food sold for this purpose and follow the directions on the package. The crickets you feed your beardie should be no larger than the distance between your beardie's eyes. Remove any uneaten crickets after 10 minutes. Remove mealworms and wax worms within 24 hours.

The insects should be dusted lightly with a calcium supplement (such as calcium carbonate powder) as well as vitamin and mineral supplements before they are fed to your pet. This is especially important for juveniles as they will not get enough calcium without supplementation.

Young beardies must get their fill of live prey. If they do not, they will cannibalize each other and potentially cause serious damage or death. Never place a juvenile beardie in an enclosure with an adult; the adult may eat the smaller one! The best way to ensure that your juvenile beardie is getting enough nutrients is to weigh and/or measure her weekly. There should be a measurable gain in weight and body length over time. You should observe an approximate two-inch gain in length every month. A beardie that is not growing at this rate is either sick or nutrient deficient.

Some adult beardies may enjoy eating juvenile mice (pinkies). Pink mice can be a great addition to a balanced adult diet. They provide trace minerals and vitamins which are not found in insects or plant materials. Pink mice do not need to be dusted with supplements.

Provide a mix of at least three different vegetables daily. Dark, leafy greens provide more necessary calcium than other vegetables. It's important to vary the veggies you offer for the best balance of essential vitamins and minerals. Chop the veggies/greens into small pieces for juveniles, and larger pieces for adults. Serve them in a heaping pile, or, for natural activity, hang a whole leaf from the top of the enclosure. Your beardie will grab and tear it as she would in the wild. As beardies mature, they will eat less prey and more vegetation. This is a normal age-related change that also occurs in the wild. An adult may eat 90% plant material.

Pesticide-free field greens are an excellent vegetable choice. These include red and green leaf lettuces, mustard greens, dandelion greens, escarole, collards, parsley, turnip greens, kale, and spinach. Other foods to try include cabbage, raisins, squash, carrots, brussel sprout, raw or plain boiled mashed potato, sweet potato, cauliflower, broccoli, green/yellow/wax beans, bok choy, radish, red/green/yellow peppers.

Providing a mixture of vegetables is important. When fed in excess, vegetables such as

broccoli, Brussel sprouts, kale, cabbage, cauliflower, and bok choy can cause a thyroid deficiency. Spinach, rhubarb, beets, and chards are high in oxalic acid which may cause gout over time. Additionally, these foods bind calcium, which prevents the body from utilizing essential dietary calcium and causes loss of bone density over time.

Fruit can be offered as a treat occasionally in small quantities (one or two bite-sized pieces). Your beardie's favorites may include watermelon, papaya, cantaloupe, mango, banana, apple, berries, and kiwi.

We do not recommend feeding tofu to your beardie. Tofu is a plant-based protein that is high in fat and can impede calcium absorption. Tofu can be fed in small quantities, but it should not be fed on a regular basis. Additionally, beardies do not need bird gravel and we do not recommend feeding it.

Fresh water should be available to your beardie at all times. A shallow container is best. The container should be washed and refilled with fresh water daily. Some juvenile beardies prefer to drink water droplets sprayed on the side of the enclosure with a spray bottle.

Outdoor Time

If you want to bring your bearded dragon outside, there are a few things to consider. Make sure the temperature will be comfortable (70-90 degrees). Remember that your beardie cannot regulate her own body temperature. The only way she can warm or cool herself is by moving to a warmer or cooler location. Beardies can move with amazing speed when they want to! They are also good climbers. Use a cat harness and leash to help prevent the heartbreak of losing your pet outside. Always keep an eye on your beardie outdoors to protect her from predators.

Bathing

Your bearded dragon may enjoy an occasional bath. Soaking will also help her to shed skin normally. Warm water stimulates reptiles to empty their bowels and bladder. Some owners will bathe their beardie before their daily exercise period to prevent accidents in the house. We recommend bathing your beardie in a separate container. Reptiles can carry salmonella bacteria and you don't want to expose yourself to it by using the same tub as your pet.

Clean and rinse your beardie's bath before and after use. The water should be lukewarm, not hot. Fill the bath so that the water is level with the beardie's body but not over her head. Your beardie may change color when bathing. This is normal. You may also see her breathing or puffing more than usual. These are signs that she is adjusting to the temperature of the water.

Salmonella

Any reptile may be carrying salmonella, even when they are perfectly healthy. Many reptiles are persistently infected. This means that they harbor the bacteria in their body at all times, and shed the bacteria into the environment when stressed. The most common sources of stress are inappropriate habitats and poor diet.

It is safest to assume that your reptile is always shedding salmonella. Always wash your hands after handling. It is especially important to supervise small children. Children and immunocompromised individuals are at most risk for serious illness from salmonella infection.

Other Illness

Most diseases in bearded dragons result from dirty enclosures, poor diet, cool temperatures, and lack of UV light. Proper care of your beardie will greatly reduce the incidence of disease. Diseases in beardies often progress slowly, so it can be difficult to detect diseases before they reach advanced stages.

Knowing what is normal for your beardie is important. Familiarize yourself with your beardie's normal appetite, activity level, amount and frequency of urination/defecation, the appearance of waste products, and the general appearance of your reptile. A change in one of these normal parameters may be a sign of disease. If you notice a change in your beardie, and the change persists beyond 1-2 days, or if you notice additional symptoms, please call us for an appointment. The sooner we can address the issue, the better chance we have at successful treatment.

Signs of an emergency may include bloody waste products, heavy breathing/panting, seizures, bloody discharges, and lameness. Call us immediately if you notice these symptoms.

Preventive Care

We recommend twice-yearly exams for juveniles and once-yearly exams for healthy adults. The signs of poor health in bearded dragons can be subtle and may not be treatable in advanced stages. We recommend a yearly blood test to check your beardie's calcium and phosphorus levels to ensure that their dietary needs are being met. This allows us to address any deficiencies before they cause disease. We also recommend a yearly fecal examination (a test run from a stool sample) to check for intestinal parasites, as beardies can harbor intestinal parasites for a long time before they develop any symptoms.