

Basic Information on Bearded Dragons

Australian bearded dragons, *Pogona vitticeps*, get their name from their ability to puff out a throat pouch that has prominent spikes formed from modified scales. Their "beard" can also turn color making it even more impressive. Bearded dragons are a calm even tempered lizard with a large variety of gestures and body language making them interesting pets especially when kept in pairs or groups. Due to their relatively small size, 16-20" they have become very popular as pets.

Bearded dragons live in an arid, rocky, semidesert region and open woodlands. They are diurnal (awake during the daytime) lizards. Being omnivores, they eat both small insects and mice, as well as soft plant matter including greens, fruits and flowers. Like most desert dwellers, they warm themselves by basking in the morning and spend the hottest part of the day in underground burrows.

Diet

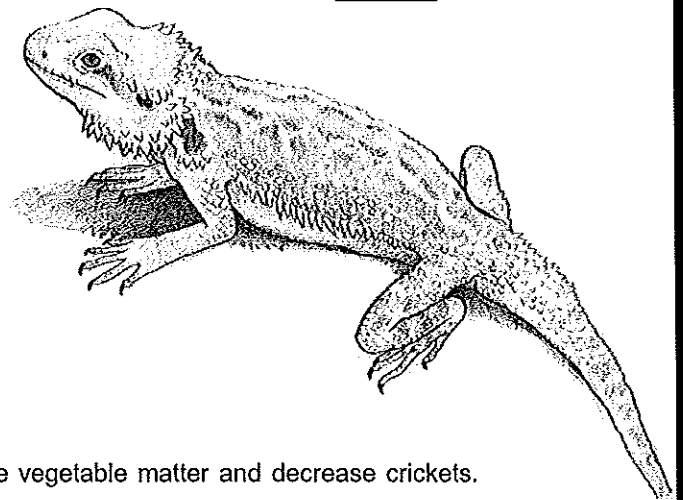
Although listed as omnivores most lizards love insects. Crickets, mealworms, earthworms, and pinkie mice make up the bulk of their diet. Offer shredded veggies and fruit. Vegetables, fruit and flowers should make up about 20% of their diet. Fruits with a good calcium content include figs, raspberries, cantaloupe, strawberries and blueberries. Veggies include collards, dandelion, mustard greens, yellow squash, sweet potato, green beans. **DO NOT** feed kale, spinach, and broccoli. They are high in oxalates which bind to calcium making it unusable.

Use these same fruits and veggies to gutload your insects. All insects should be gut loaded with a balanced diet and even some calcium and vitamins before being offered to reptiles. ESU makes a product called "Gutload" for crickets that takes the guess work out of the process.

Dust insects with a calcium supplement every feeding and vitamins once every two weeks. Sprinkle a pinch of calcium powder over veggies too. **DO NOT** feed wild caught insects. They may have traces of insecticide. **DO NOT** feed lightning bugs - they are **TOXIC** to all nonnative reptiles.

Young bearded dragons are voracious eaters. Offer veggies & fruit mix twice daily along with as many crickets as needed. If not properly fed - your babies may nibble on each other. Adults may eat crickets every other day with veggies all the time. Leave mealworms as snacks. Be careful with waxworms. They are high in fat and should be used as a treat.

Young lizards need more protein than older lizards. Start with more crickets than veggies - then as the lizard ages increase



the vegetable matter and decrease crickets.

Even though your beardie comes from a desert region, it still needs water. Mist the veggies daily. Provide a shallow water dish shallow enough so it can see the water. Occasionally mist your pet or the walls of the enclosure, but don't allow the enclosure to become damp.

Food items should be no longer than the distance between the dragon's eyes. You dragon can swallow larger items but this may cause indigestion from which your lizard may never recover. Food items can be offered by hand or served in a bowl. If your dragon stops eating - there is a problem. Check the temperature. A dragon body temperature needs to be 100° in order to digest it's food. In the morning, feed about an hour after you've turned on the basking light. In the evening feed at least one hour before you turn off the basking light.

Habitat

Baby dragons can live in a 10 gallon tank. Adults need at least a 30 gallon long tank with a 55 gallon being ideal. Decorate with sturdy well placed branches and a snug hiding area for sleeping. Bearded Dragons like a nice high perch with a good view. Make this it's basking area. **CAUTION**, too many decorations give crickets a place to hide. Crickets have been known to nibble on sleeping dragons (who sleep quite soundly). At best they will stress your dragon, at worst they could nibble through an eyelid. One alternative is to house your dragon in a well decorated tank and feed your pet in a separate tank.

Heating

The cool side of your dragon's enclosure should be in the low 70°s. The warm side should be in the low 80°s. The basking area should be between 90° and 105°F. Don't guess at the temperature, use two thermometers. One on the cool side and one on the basking side. **Caution: DO NOT COOK YOUR DRAGON!** Place a thermometer on the basking area. Increase or decrease the distance of your basking light until you get the right temperature. If your pet's habitat is too

cool, it may not digest its food properly. Basking lights, incandescent heating bulbs, ceramic heat emitters, and under-the-tank heating pads are all heating options for your habitat.

Lighting

Dragons need UVB light in order to use the calcium in their diet. Many incandescent bulbs call themselves "full spectrum" lighting, but in reality they provide UVA lighting. While reptiles do need UVA, it will not promote the synthesis of vitamin D3 in the skin and their systems will not be able to use the calcium in their diet. Many reptile owners are using dietary vitamin D3 rather than rely on lighting. There is still much research needed in this area, no one answer seems to be true for all reptiles. We maintain that the most natural environment possible is best for your pet. In this instance, we recommend UVB lighting rather than dietary supplements for the health of your pet.

Keep all lighting elements on a timer in order to get the proper photo period. If you use an incandescent bulb for heat, use an infrared bulb at night so as not to interrupt your pet's sleep cycle.

NOTE: Improper diet, inadequate heat, and or improper lighting can cause a reptile to not digest its food properly or make use of the calcium and other nutrients in its diet. This can cause a calcium deficiency. Metabolic Bone Disease can affect organs as well as bones. Bones become spongy and fractures occur. The lizard may exhibit muscle tremors or a jerky gait. **UVB lighting, calcium supplement and proper temperature is a MUST for all dragons.**

Substrate

Vita Sand by Zoomed, aspen crumble bedding and CareFresh bedding are all good options as substrates. Since these will digest if accidentally ingested by your pet, they will not cause impactions. They will hold humidity when misted and they all look great in a natural habitat.

Purchasing a pet

When purchasing a bearded dragon look for an active dragon whose eyes are bright and alert with no sign of discharge. The dragon's body and tail should be slightly rounded and filled out. Examine the limbs and feet - look for swelling or damage. Feel along the body and tail for swelling and lumps. Look at the snout. It should not appear swollen or badly damaged. Rub your finger at the mouth line or tap gently. This should cause the dragon to open its mouth. Look inside for signs of swelling or mucus (cheesy, curdy looking substances). Look at the dragon's vent for signs of swelling or caked on diarrhea.

Shedding

Dragons may stop eating and appear lethargic when starting a shed. The skin may come off in large patches. Mist and provide a clean soaking area. Don't help them pull it off - you may damage the new skin underneath.

Handling

Be polite, don't suddenly grab your pet. Approach slowly. Pick up the lizard by cupping your hand under the belly with

your index finger up toward their neck between the forelegs, their rear end resting on your wrist/arm. Always support the tail so they don't feel out-of-balance.

Holding Tips: If your pet starts to thrash and roll, do not restrain it by holding it tighter! Let it roll around in your hands, holding it slightly away from your body and chest height, and keep it away from faces. Hold it straight up in the air if necessary until it calms down.

Hygiene

Don't kiss your dragon. Reptiles can be non-symptomatic carriers of Salmonella bacteria. Wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant, after handling your dragon. Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes, by using a 10% bleach solution. Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes. Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immune-compromised person in your home.

Veterinary Care

Take a stool sample from your pet to a reptile vet to check for parasites. Many captive bred lizards are parasite free at birth only to ingest parasites from crickets or greens. Make sure your vet is actually familiar with reptiles. Do a fecal check if the lizard stops eating, slows its growth significantly, appears stressed or hides, has runny stools, or just doesn't act its usual self.

Sexing

Body proportions differ: males have a larger head to body ratio, whereas females have a large body with a medium head and are often smaller overall. Dragons become sexually mature as early as 8 months and can be sexed then by the femoral pores (rounded pores on the under surface of the thigh in a line above the femur bone). The femoral pores are noticeably larger in males than females. A reptile vet can probe your dragon when it's around 18 months old. Unfortunately probing can damage your pet. Make sure the vet knows what they are doing. Once your pet is sexually mature, comparing your dragon with other dragons is the safest way to sex your pet.

FYI

Do not put your dragon on his back. When a lizard is placed on its back the abdominal organs may displace and apply pressure to the lizards lung cavity and rib cage. This may make the act of breathing very difficult for your lizard. So when you turn your dragon on its back and it closes its eyes, it's probably not sleeping... it's most likely concentrating on breathing. If left on his back for too long, it will suffocate.

Please Note: The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only. There are several good books available on the care and maintenance of bearded dragons.

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