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Bearded Dragon Care

Bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*, *P. barbata*, etc.) are naturally from Australia and live in rocky, desert-like areas, as well as in woodlands. Dragons, as they are sometimes called, are avid climbers and love to bask on rocks and branches in the morning and afternoon. Bearded dragons are a diurnal species, meaning they are active during the day time, just like humans. In the wild, they spend the hottest part of the day in underground burrows to avoid the heat and can tolerate the cool desert nights well. Their diet is omnivorous and they eat both invertebrates and vegetation in their natural habitat. Unlike many other reptiles, bearded dragons are very social animals, which makes them great engaging pets in captivity.

Housing

Bearded dragons need a significantly large enclosure to meet their housing needs. Even a 50-gallon aquarium can be too small for adults, especially males who can be pretty territorial. Housing several bearded dragons together is acceptable since they are such social animals, but hatchlings should not be housed with juveniles or adults due to the territorial and aggressive nature of adults and males. Dragons will eat small invertebrates and cannibalism of smaller lizards is not uncommon, especially when crowded or stressed. The enclosure should be both long and tall to meet the needs of the beardie. A minimum suggestion for the dimensions is 3 feet long by 3 feet high by 2 feet wide. This will allow your beardie to have plenty of room to move around naturally in the enclosure. A significant temperature gradient is necessary to allow the dragon to heat and cool itself as needed. The tank must have a lid that allows ventilation and containment of both the dragon and the prey or crickets.

For pet purposes, AstroTurf, butcher paper, paper towels, or unprinted newsprint are the best options and most sanitary for the substrate, or bottom of the cage. In the wild, sand is a more natural substrate allowing burrowing but this can be difficult to disinfect and clean. In captivity, sand is thought to be a contributing factor for intestinal impaction, which can be a serious, life-threatening condition. Do not use corn or walnut cob, alfalfa pellets, kitty litter, or any type of wood shavings because these items harbor fungus and algae, and can not be disinfected appropriately.

Bearded dragons need both branches and climbing logs to bask, as well as hiding spots. The enclosure should be large enough to allow hiding areas in both the cool and warm areas of the tank. The basking area should be high up in the warmest area of the tank. River rocks work well for lower basking areas and will add a nice look to the enclosure. Reptile basking hot rocks are not recommended as they can cause fatal burns to reptiles. Be aware that hiding spots and loose bark are great hiding places for crickets, as well as under paper substrate. Caution should be taken to search out live crickets before night time so your dragon does not become injured by the crickets overnight.

Cleaning should include removing and replacing AstroTurf or paper weekly, and complete enclosure cleaning monthly. A 1:10 solution of bleach can be used to soak all cage furniture. Everything should be allowed to dry completely before replacing so having two of everything makes rotating items in and out of the enclosure very easy.

Providing a temperature gradient for all reptiles is a must, which means having a warm and cool area in the same enclosure. This allows the cold blooded animal to warm and cool itself as needed. Although desert animals, bearded dragons are no exception to this rule. Their gradient should range from 76°F on the cool side to 86°F on the warm side, with the basking area ranging from 90°–100°F. Night time temperatures should be no lower than the coolest side of the tank. A heating pad set on low under the warm end of the tank allows for slow warming of the tank floor. A basking light or heating element should be positioned above the warmest side of the tank to allow for the lizard to climb to the basking area, which will be the warmest spot in the tank. Thermometers are a must and with this type of cage set-up. Three thermometers are needed to confirm that the temperature needs of your bearded are met. This includes one at the cool end, one at the warm end, and one in the basking area.

All reptiles also need unfiltered sunlight or UVB light daily to process calcium and for optimal digestion and health. This is a critical aspect of health and important to address when setting up the proper enclosure. There are UVB producing fluorescent tube lights that are available for this purpose and some brands include Duro-Test's Vita-Lite or Vita-Lite Plus, Zoo Med's Iguana or Reptisun lights. Plant lights and aquarium lights are "wide-spectrum" not "full-spectrum" and it is a must to confirm that the lighting will provide full UVB lighting for your pet. Incandescent lights are appropriate for providing a heat source for the basking area of the tank, but these will not meet the UVB requirements for your bearded dragon. Because bearded dragons need about 14 hours of light during the day and 10 hours of dark at night, it is important to remember that lights should be turned off at night. Ceramic heating elements or nocturnal reptile bulbs can be used to supplement the heating pad under the tank at night, but it is critical to allow the lizard to have full darkness at night to prevent stress related illness.

Nutrition

Water must be kept in the tank at all times. Shallow dishes that allow the dragon to see the bottom of the dish are ideal. It is a must to clean the dish daily and keep the water fresh at all times. Misting your dragon with water once or twice a day is also helpful for normal shedding and is a more natural way to provide water intake for bearded dragons.

As was mentioned earlier, dragons are omnivorous and require a large variety of foods to stay healthy. Insects should be provided daily and some options include small crickets, mealworms, and wax worms. These can all be purchased at local pet stores, but must be gut loaded before feeding. Pet store insects are not fed well so it is important to feed them for about 24 hours prior to feeding. Products like baby cereal, Gut load, veggies and fresh fruit are the recommended items for feeding your insects. They should also be dusted with a calcium supplement prior to offering to the dragon for food.

There are many choices of leafy green vegetables and fresh fruits to choose from. Some suggestions are kale, arugula, collard & mustard greens, parsley, dandelion greens and flowers, endives, radish, carrot and turnip tops, escarole and chicory endive, squash, corn, peas, carrots (shredded), sweet potato, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers, chard.. Chopped fruit such as cantaloupe, apple, blueberries, peaches, pears, grapes, plums, raspberries, which must be chopped finely to avoid choking. Rotating the options and keeping the variety going is helpful for optimal nutrition. Avoid iceberg lettuce as it has very little nutrients and is mostly water. Remember to remove any fresh produce after 3-4 hours, as these can spoil and cause illness in your dragon.

Normal Behavior

Bearded dragons engage in several behaviors that are entertaining to watch. Bearded dragons are named for their beard of skin under their heads. This skin can be displayed and will change color during breeding or establishing hierarchy with other dragons. Both males and females can display their beards but it more common in males. Head bobbing is another dominance display by dragons during breeding or when establishing a new territory. Arm waving is often the subordinate response to the head bobbing or beard display. This behavior will likely only be seen when several bearded are kept in the same enclosure. Dragons can raise their tail and will often engage in this behavior when breeding or during feeding, especially of prey items. As endearing as these may be to us, they are very useful for communication between dragons and should a reminder of how awesome nature is in providing such useful tools for communicating within a species.

Sickness in bearded dragons, as with all reptiles, can be very difficult to notice in the early stages. Typically, when a reptile is acting sick it is seriously ill and needs immediate veterinary attention. Annual veterinary exams are recommended to catch problems early. Improper housing and nutrition are frequently a cause of sickness in reptiles. Attention must be paid to temperatures and feeding to make sure your dragon's primary needs are met. As soon as problems are noticed, it is critical to schedule a veterinary exam so that problems can be addressed and treatment can be successful.

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References:

- Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection @ <http://www.anapsid.org/bearded.html>
- Bearded Dragons and Other Creatures @ <http://www.dachiu.com/care/abeard.html>



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Photo from <http://www.reptile-cage-plans.com/gallery/galimages/beardeddragon2.jpg>