

Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*)

Introduction to Bearded Dragons

The Bearded Dragon, a native of Australia, has become an incredible herpetocultural success story. After arriving into the US reptile pet market in the early 1990s, they have become established as one of the favorite pets of all ages of reptile keepers. They are found in classrooms and bedrooms all over the country. Adult Bearded Dragons reach an adult length of 15" and hatchlings are usually in the 3" to 4" range. The Bearded Dragon's spiny "beard" is flared out in defensive displays and during courtship behavior. The male dragon's beard is usually more pronounced and darker than the beard of the female. Selecting pairs with unique coloration by breeders has produced a wide range of beautiful colorations that pet owners can select from.

Housing Bearded Dragons

Bearded Dragons evolved in a hot, arid environment. Their captive enclosure should reflect this habitat but care must be taken, especially if kept in glass terrariums. We suggest a 20-gallon long terrarium (12" w x 12" h x 20" l) for a small Bearded Dragon. As it grows, it will need a larger enclosure. Adult Bearded Dragons will require at least a 60- to 75-gallon terrarium (18" w x 18" h x 48" l or larger). Typically, glass terrariums are relatively inexpensive, available in a variety of sizes, and look nice when set up in a special part of a keeper's home. Secure and sturdy screen tops are available for these glass terrariums and are usually easy to find at local pet stores. They are important to hold hot lamps safely, to prevent escapes, and to prevent other family pets from getting to your pet lizard. If a keeper is handy with tools, custom built enclosures are also popular and can be built inexpensively in a variety of sizes.

There is a growing movement in the reptile hobby for the establishment of creative and elaborate naturalistic vivariums for reptiles. The business of selling driftwood, moss, misting systems, colorful sand, and other supplies is thriving. Substrates are an important addition to the look of a naturalistic setup. There is some concern about Bearded Dragons ingesting sand as they pounce on crickets that wander their enclosure. Many promote keeping young dragons on paper towel substrate. It is easy to clean, inexpensive, and prevents the young dragons that are just "finding their feet" in attacking prey from ingesting harmful amounts of sand. We think natural and even "bio-active" enclosures are much more exciting and though we agree that paper towel can be a good substrate for young dragons, we do not support the use of newspaper, reptile carpet, or wood shavings as substrates. We do not use cypress mulch or pine shavings as a cage substrate because they can hold excess moisture and they can also cause problems if eaten. Also, we do not use aquarium or pea gravel because it could certainly cause problems if ingested.

There is no doubt that the addition of driftwood, cork bark, stable rock piles, and other cage decorations is important in keeping captive Bearded Dragons healthy and stimulated. These decorations will provide both basking areas and areas for dragons to hide, to rest, and to sleep. If you collect branches and other decorations from nature, be sure that they come from an area that is not sprayed with pesticides and that they are non-toxic.

Feeding Bearded Dragons

Feeding captive Bearded Dragons is simple and straightforward. They are going to need a varied diet consisting of live prey such as crickets, mealworms, waxworms, hornworms, and occasionally pink or fuzzy mice. It is a good rule of thumb to feed your reptiles insects that are no larger than the distance between your pet's eyes to prevent choking. It's also important to note that prey that is too small may not be interesting enough for your pets to hunt. In addition, they need a variety of shredded greens once or twice a week.

We feel that small dragons should be fed a couple of small insects every day and they should be fed finely shredded greens two or three times a week. We typically feed small crickets every day and add a small mealworm every two or three days and a wax worm once every couple of weeks. Small insects and small meals are best and there is the belief that large meals and feeding insects that are too large for the dragon can cause leg paralysis, choking, and even death. As they grow, they can be fed larger insects and larger amounts less often, and their intake of shredded greens and vegetables can be increased to three to four times a week. For all sizes of dragons, Vita-Bug® insects are the best, and most natural source of protein, fat, moisture and vitamins for your Bearded Dragon. Similarly, CalciWorms® are the best natural source of calcium for your pet. A complete diet for your pet bearded dragon would include a variety of Vita-Bug® insects, Calciworms® and Timberline's reptile salad. Vita-Bugs® deliver all of the vitamins, protein, fat and moisture, Calciworms® deliver all of the Calcium needed, and the Reptile Salad contains a great mix of greens beneficial to your dragon.

Watering Bearded Dragons

In nature, Bearded Dragons get their water from rainfall and when dew is licked off of plants. To simulate this in captivity, we typically let water drip into a dish in the enclosure to stimulate drinking. Many keepers mist their dragons once a day with a spray bottle.



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Heating and Lighting for Bearded Dragons

Obviously, a reptile from a hot, sunny environment is going to require plenty of environmental heat in its enclosure. In nature, reptiles move between hot, sunny areas and cooler, shaded areas to regulate their body temperature. A Bearded Dragon's enclosure should provide them with the ability to act out this thermoregulatory behavior by having a hot end and a cooler end. Add a hot spot over one end to serve as the basking area and add some shelter at the other end so that a captive dragon can remove itself from the heat. This is the reason that 20-gallon long terrariums and other longer profile enclosures work much better for pet dragons. The basking spot should reach temperatures of 95° to 105° F, which can be provided by an overhead lamp. We use 50 to 100 watt ZooMed® Powersun bulbs that emit both UVB and heat mounted in a fixture with a porcelain fixture on a sturdy screen top (or hanging just overhead). The UVB is important and allows diurnal captive reptiles to produce Vitamin D3 which in turn allows them to properly absorb the calcium they need to form healthy bones and to have healthy, working muscles. Do not neglect this important feature in the lives of these lizards. Metabolic Bone Disease is a common ailment in captive diurnal (active during the day) reptiles that are not given access to unfiltered natural sunlight or to UVB-emitting lamps. In cooler areas or during winter months, a keeper can add a heat source under the enclosure in the form of a reptile heat mat. The goal for a keeper should be to keep the entire enclosure in the 78° to 82° F range and to keep the hot spot around 95° to 105° F unless you choose to let your Bearded Dragon hibernate for the winter months.

Bearded Dragon Health

Bearded Dragons have relatively few common health issues. Those that are fed improper diets, or fed standard feeder insects, and those that are not kept hot enough will suffer terrible and sometimes life-threatening bone deformities. They must be fed a varied diet that include vitamin-complete Vita-Bugs, Calciworms for calcium, along with a fresh green mix like Reptile Salad. It is also critical that pet Bearded Dragons are housed in enclosures that offer them a hot basking area under bulbs that provide heat and UVB rays.

As Bearded Dragons are very prolific and in warm areas can produce offspring year-round, there is no shortage of animals available. They are available from better reptile stores, on-line, or at reptile shows and expos. Try to purchase your dragon from a breeder or someone with intimate knowledge of Bearded Dragons. They will help you set up the proper enclosure and will give you helpful hints so you are successful. I would suggest a beginning keeper purchase a dragon that is at least a month or two old to make sure it is past the hatchling stage, in which dragons are quite delicate. Though there are a wide range of prices, usually based on the dragon's color, a drab, gray dragon will make a wonderful pet.

Like other popular pet reptiles such as the Leopard Gecko, the Crested Gecko, the Ball Python, the Cornsnake, and a few others, Bearded Dragons are now being bred in such numbers that they are being genetically manipulated for color, temperament, and even size. "Blood Red", "High Orange", "Peach", "Tiger-striped", "Hypomelanistic", "Lemon Yellow", "White", "Giant", and other morphs are being produced.

Bearded Dragons are Wonderful Pets for the Home and Classroom

Newly acquired Bearded Dragons should be allowed to get acclimated to their new enclosures and should be feeding well for at least a couple of weeks before a keeper attempts to handle them. Once acclimated, Bearded Dragons will typically accept short periods of handling and even hand-feeding. All children should be supervised and instructed on careful handling procedures. A handler should sit in the floor when handling their reptile pet. In case the dragon jumps or falls, it will probably not receive any serious harm from a shorter distance. As with all reptile pets, anyone who handles the reptile should be sure to wash his or her hands with soap and water after handling their pets.



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