

# BEARDED DRAGON CARE SHEET

## HABITAT AND HISTORY

The inland bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*) is native to the arid woodlands and deserts of central Australia, where it spends the majority of its days basking on rocks and roaming around bushes and trees. When the Australian heat is too much, the dragons burrow underground to keep themselves cool.

Bearded dragons didn't come to the United States until the 1990s but have since become one of the most popular lizard pets. These days, beardies can be found in nearly every pet shop and are bred to achieve many different colors and morphs. The average captive-bred inland bearded dragon will have a lifespan between 5 and 8 years, with some living to the ripe old age of 10 years when raised in optimal conditions. There have been reports of a twelve-year old specimen, but they were unauthenticated.

## SIZE AND APPEARANCE

Inland beardies are usually just under 4 inches in length when born and can grow to a length between 19 and 23 inches, with a weight of at least .75 pounds (250 grams). The exception to this estimate is the German giant morph, which can reach a length of 26 inches.

The original inland bearded dragon is a brown and tan/yellow, with small amounts of yellow and red found mostly on the head. There are a few different kinds of morphs, animals that are bred to achieve certain appearances or characteristics not found in nature. The types of morphs include German giant dragon morphs, vivid orange-red Sandfire morphs, pale hypomelanistic pastel morphs and snow/ghost dragon morphs.

Bearded dragons have triangular shaped heads, long tails, and plump round bodies that look slightly flattened, becoming even more pronounced when the animals are alarmed. They are covered with spiky spines running along the head, throat, and body. They got the nickname "bearded dragon" from their ability to puff out their throats when threatened, giving the appearance of a full-grown beard of pointed spikes. In a state of agitation bearded dragons can look quite fierce. But fear not—unlike porcupines, the spikes are stiff but not dangerous.

## CARE LEVEL

Most reptile experts rank bearded dragons as one of the best reptile pets around. They are attractive, active, entertaining, moderately sized and easy to handle, and relatively easy to keep. Bearded dragons also have, for the most part, a naturally tame temperament, making them a great pet—for beginners up to advanced herpetoculturists. They are hardy and robust, yet safe enough for children to handle—as long as proper hand washing is practiced (which goes for all ages). Bearded dragons in particular need to have their nails clipped to prevent overgrowth, which can lead to unnaturally, and uncomfortably, bent toes. If you do not feel comfortable clipping your beardie's nails on your own, talk to your veterinarian about it.

## DIET

Bearded dragons are relatively easy to feed, with one exception: young beardies require live food. Without an adequate amount of live prey, a young beardie can suffer from malnutrition, stunted growth, and even death from starvation.

There are commercial diets that exist for bearded dragons, usually in the form of pelleted food. However, even if a food is marketed specifically for bearded dragons, you should always supplement a dragon's commercial diet with insects, produce, and other naturally sourced supplements.

Bearded dragons are healthy eaters that enjoy variety. As far as live food goes, bearded dragons prefer the non-flying type of insects, like crickets, mealworms, giant mealworms, superworms, wax worms, and juvenile Madagascar hissing cockroaches. Larger beardies also relish eating small live lizards from time to time, and these can help provide nutrients like calcium and other trace vitamins and minerals not readily available through insects and vegetables.

A good rule of thumb is to feed your dragon as many crickets as it can eat in ten minutes. Note that when feeding your dragon live prey like crickets, never feed it a cricket that is longer than the width of its head. In fact, never feed your dragon anything that's longer than the width of its head. Beardies have died from attempting to consume prey animals that are too large.

Another important note: Never leave live prey in the cage with your dragon overnight. An understandably frightened prey animal can cause injury to your dragon, sometimes severe enough for emergency care.

Young dragons will have bigger appetites than older dragons. While young bearded dragons are fed mostly insect matter, they should be offered plant based foods as well. As they grow older, bearded dragons' diets tend to shift to mostly plant matter, but they will still require some amounts of live food. As they age, the amount of salads should increase as live insect matter decreases. Greens and produce should be fed to your bearded dragon in appropriately sized pieces, usually fine chopped. Always ensure the greenery you feed your pet has been untreated by pesticides and herbicides. Bearded dragons enjoy the leaves and blossoms of clover, dandelions, and mustard, as well as rose petals, hibiscus flowers, and calendula. Fruits and, especially, vegetables can be fed to them as well, but keep the sugary fruits minimal. Feed your bearded dragon during the daytime, when it is active, offering the bulk of its food in the morning. Young Bearded dragons get a second meal, too. Crickets should be fed about 1-2 hours before lights-out.

Adult dragons may only need to be fed once per day or once every other day. Observe and follow your dragon's lead and report any abrupt changes in appetite to your veterinarian.

All bearded dragons require reptile supplements; specifically, supplementation with a powdered vitamin/mineral supplement and calcium. There are plenty of reptile supplements available at your local pet shop, just make sure to carefully examine the labels to choose one that has the right formulation. Ideally, you should select a source of calcium, like calcium carbonate powder, plus a supplement with vitamins and minerals. The supplements should be dusted occasionally over the beardie's food, whether that is the salad portion of its meal, or even the insects (shake the powder in the bag with the crickets).

## **HEALTH**

### **Common Health Issues in Bearded Dragons**

Bearded dragons are an extremely hardy species—once thought to be “bulletproof,”—but no pet is invincible. Parasites, nutritional disorders, kidney disease, prolapses, egg binding, and respiratory infections are some common health concerns to be on the lookout for in your bearded dragons. The following is a short summary of bearded dragon diseases and disorders.

### **Infectious Diseases and Parasites**

**Parasites** can be quite troublesome and can multiply quickly, so if you suspect your dragon is infected you need to seek veterinary help immediately.

Coccidia is the most common parasite disorder in beardies and manifests itself in the small intestine. Other common parasites your dragon may attract are pinworms, tapeworms, microsporidia and pentastomids. You can rarely spot these and most other parasites in your dragon's stool as they are microscopic.

**External parasites** like mites are less common and often come from other infected reptiles, most often snakes. Remedying a mite infestation starts with an entire cage cleaning combined with an ivermectin-based spray. If your dragon appears listless or has white moving dots all over its body, take it to the vet to check for a mite infestation.

### **Nutritional & Metabolic Disorders**

Nutritional disorders in bearded dragons most commonly stem from calcium and D3 deficiencies, called metabolic bone disease. This can happen when beardies are fed excessive amounts of meat. Feeding your dragon a diet heavy with crickets may seem good, but many crickets bought from pet stores aren't "gut loaded," meaning they haven't been fed the proper nutrients or dusted with nutritional supplements prior to being fed to dragons.

Another cause of metabolic bone disease is due to improper ultraviolet lighting. Almost all non-carnivorous reptiles need UV lighting either naturally from the sun or artificially from special reptile lighting. Without the proper UV, your lizard may not be able to absorb the calcium and vitamin d even if the diet is appropriate.

The main sign that your beardie is suffering from a lack of calcium or D3 is twitching and muscle tremors. If your dragon begins to twitch, it probably needs calcium immediately. Sometimes a lack of calcium will also cause dragons to become constipated. If this is the case, they can be given a gentle enema by your vet. Always consult a veterinarian if you believe your dragon is suffering from a lack of nutrition or otherwise.

On the other hand, too much calcium or D3 can cause a dragon to develop gout or kidney disease. This is another reason why it's extremely important to maintain proper nutrition levels and to always have clean drinking water available.

### **Egg Binding**

Female bearded dragons can lay eggs even if there is no male dragon present. Of course, these eggs are not fertile but they still can create health problems. If a dragon produces eggs, she can use up her reservoirs of calcium, so diet, UV lighting, and supplementation become even more important. Also, eggs can get stuck inside, and if left for too long can cause an egg-bound condition. If your female dragon looks bloated and is losing appetite and energy, see your reptile vet at once.

### **Prolapse**

If your male dragon has a prolapse—a dark red mass protruding from its vent, seek veterinarian help at once. Prolapses are inflammations of the "beard," and while not common they should be treated as an emergency.

## **BEHAVIOR**

Bearded dragons are friendly, alert, and animated creatures. They tend to vary in personality; some are more responsive and intelligent than others, and a few are rambunctious their entire lives, which can lead to aggression. They generally do well on their own and may even show owner recognition, especially when approached with a tasty treat. Never house adult males together, or adults with juveniles. As with other pets, it's important to evaluate the bearded dragons before selecting which one to bring home.

## **HABITAT SETUP**

Bearded dragons are moderately sized lizards that require large enclosures. You have the choice of buying a smaller enclosure that you will upgrade as the lizard grows, or you can buy a full-sized enclosure from the jump. Regardless, you'll want at least a 55-gallon enclosure for a single adult dragon and 6-foot by 18-inch vivarium for a pair of dragons.

## **Heat**

Like other reptiles, bearded dragons do not produce their own body heat. They require an external source of heat, which can be combined with a light source. Proper heating and lighting is essential to a happy, healthy bearded dragon. Without them, your dragon won't be able to properly metabolize food and will die. Keep a thermometer for monitoring air temperature at all times. The temperature measured at the site should be a steady 90 – 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

To properly heat your lizard's habitat, use a white (not red) incandescent bulb or spotlight in a reflector-type fixture that can handle the wattage and heat output. Place the bulb above the arranged basking site(s), outside of the enclosure to prevent accidental skin burns.

In this writer's opinion, heat rocks should be avoided. It is very easy for your beardie to burn himself on a hot rock or with any other source of heat that it can have direct contact with. Using heat sources that are installed above or under the enclosure are much safer and more effective.

Heat rocks can be especially dangerous for babies.

A heating pad placed beneath the enclosure is another method for creating warm spaces for your bearded dragon. Under-tank heaters are available in many sizes. Having more than one place to find warmth, especially if the heat sources are at varying levels of heat, will allow your dragon to thermoregulate at the ideal body temperature.

## **Light**

Lizards like the bearded dragon thrive under UV-B lights. Full spectrum or high UV-B reptile bulbs are recommended not only to help the lizard's metabolism, but also to provide the necessary D3 vitamin that they otherwise cannot produce on their own. Remember, bearded dragons are light loving desert-dwellers. Generally, the more light they receive, the happier and more active they will be.

Bearded dragons, once mature, enter a winter shutdown period once per year when they can remain inactive and hidden. It's completely normal during the shutdown period for the dragon to eat very little, if anything at all. During this period, cage temperatures should be maintained slightly cooler—between 60-70 degrees Fahrenheit. The winter shutdown can last from anywhere between a few weeks to five months. Stay alert as the winter nears; about one week before the onset of cooler temperatures, reduce and then progressively eliminate food for your dragon. Alternatively, you can wait and observe the dragon closely, initiating shutdown conditions as soon as the dragon shows reduced activity and food intake. This may be preferable, since not all beardies experience a winter shutdown. Some dragons will stay active year-round, especially when ambient temperatures are kept in the 80s-90s all the time.

## **Substrates**

Some breeders choose to use no substrate, which is good for keeping an eye on stool and prey animals, plus it's less-intensive as far as maintenance is concerned. However, the hard smooth surface can lead to overgrown nails and bent toes in older dragons.

Paper towel or brown butcher paper makes a great second option, especially for quarantine and when treating sick dragons. It's cheap, readily available, and easy to replace, not to mention it's perfect for monitoring growth as well as for examining a sick dragons' stool.

Silica-based, dust-free sand products specially made for reptiles make an excellent substrate, too, but there is the risk that young dragons can suffer from sand impaction due to incidental ingestion. A good rule of thumb is to use brown paper or paper towel for dragons less than 8 inches in length, then move to a sand substrate when the dragon reaches adulthood.

Terrarium liners are a decorative alternative to paper towel or butcher paper. It can be cut to the necessary size and is easy to clean. It should be replaced when thorough cleaning is no longer possible.

Stay away from alfalfa pellets, cedar, wood shavings, and gravel.

### **Branches and Shelters**

Bearded dragons absolutely need logs, thick branches, and/or rocks to climb on. They are semi-arboreal and enjoy this activity, plus, it's fun to watch! They also need to have a place to hide inside, whether it is a smallish "cave" shaped structure or a cozy cardboard box; make sure it is just big enough for your beardie to fit itself within snugly. Try different types of shelters until you find one that your dragon prefers, and replace with new ones as your dragon outgrows them or loses interest in them.

### **Water**

Two schools of thought exist when it comes to watering bearded dragons and providing water bowls: 1. to provide one or the other, and 2. to provide no water and instead remove the dragon from its enclosure and soak it in a pan of shallow water 2-3 times per week.

If choosing to provide a water dish in the enclosure, keep it shallow. Make sure it's no more than half the dragon's body height—its height when at rest—but wide enough for it to fit its entire body width within. Beardies like to enter their water dishes and then lower their heads to drink. However, beardies aren't the brightest and may have trouble recognizing standing water, so the water must be visible when the animal is standing on all fours.

### **HANDLING AND TEMPERAMENT**

Bearded dragons are generally quite docile and will tolerate handling better than other lizard species. This is especially true of adults that have spent their entire lives in captivity (of course, there may be exceptions). It's not unusual to visit a reptile expo and see fat and happy bearded dragons lounging amid merchandise at vendor tables, or perched on their owners' shoulders.