

Bearded Dragon Care

These Australian outback desert species are interesting and interactive pets. They generally have a laid back nature and can become very tame and friendly, often making them a popular choice for first time reptile owners.

There are several subspecies of bearded dragons. Central, pygmy and eastern bearded dragons are most commonly kept as pets in Australia.

They can make wonderful pets but have many environmental requirements that are important to understand when owning a bearded dragon.



LIFE SPAN: 8-15 years

ADULT SIZE (subspecies dependent):

- Central bearded dragons: 40-60cm long
- Pygmy bearded dragons: 20-30cm long
- Males tend to be larger with larger head

SEXUAL MATURITY: 8-18 months old

Diet

Bearded dragons are omnivorous species. Meaning they require both animal/insect and plant based food in their diet. In the wild they feed on a variety of insects and shrub land plants. This diet should be replicated as closely as possible in captivity.

Juvenile bearded dragons are primarily insectivorous. They should be fed a variety of insects including, but not limited to crickets, woodroaches, grasshoppers, silk worms, wax worms and locusts. Fattening insects such as mealworms should only be fed occasionally as treats due to their ability to cause obesity and constipation. They can also occasionally be fed a small portion of a pinky mouse but this should be fed infrequently to avoid obesity.

Adults are predominantly herbivorous and need to be fed a variety of plant foods including vegetables, weeds and herbs. Examples include kale, swiss chard, silverbeet, bok choy, parsley, peas, squash, capsicum, cucumber, dandelion, chicory, zucchini, broccoli, sweet potato,

carrots and tomato. Plant foods should comprise 50-70% of the diet for adult bearded dragons. Animal matter/ insects should only comprise 25-30% of the diet. Variety is the key to providing a balanced diet and preventing fussy eaters from a young age!

Calcium supplementation is essential for all bearded dragons, especially juvenile bearded dragons. A pure calcium carbonate powder or calcium gluconate/ gluconate syrup should be applied over the food items before feeding. A multivitamin powder that also includes vitamin D can be used over food once weekly. Insects should also be fed a commercial gut-loading formula such as the Vetafarm Herpegrub 3-5 days before they are fed to the lizards to help prevent nutritional deficiencies.

Juvenile bearded dragons < 4 months old should be fed twice daily. Juveniles up to 12 months old should be fed once daily and adults should be fed insects every second day but plant foods can be provided daily.

The amount to feed daily should be about the size of the lizards head.

Fresh water should always be available and ideally provided in a stainless steel or ceramic bowl.

Housing

Reptiles need to be kept in a secure, enclosed vivarium. The vivarium can be constructed from glass solely or glass with wood or mesh. One adult central bearded dragon requires a vivarium that is at least 238L. More space is required if you are housing more than one dragon.

Dragons of different sizes should not be housed together as fighting and injury is more likely.

Cage furniture should include at the very minimum at least one log for climbing, at least one hide and a basking surface such as a rock or hammock but it is preferable to provide a variety of climbing surfaces and hiding spots.

The best substrate is newspaper as this is the most hygienic and easiest to keep clean and replace. Substrates such as hemp or sand can harbor germs and micro-organisms (bacteria and fungi) and lead to disease. Furthermore, sand is often inadvertently ingested in juvenile bearded dragons when feeding and can lead to sand impaction in their bowels. If sand is to be used it should ideally be used in a separate container rather than throughout the enclosure.

The enclosure should be spot cleaned regularly and the entire enclosure (including furnishings) cleaned out using a suitable disinfectant such as F10 (1 in 250 dilution with water) once weekly. The substrate should also be changed at this time. Food and water bowls should be cleaned and refreshed daily.

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Heating

Unlike mammals, reptiles are ectothermic. This means that rather than regulating their core body temperature internally, it is dictated directly by the environmental temperature. Therefore, the provision of artificial heating is imperative to their survival. All reptiles have a preferred body temperature (PBT). The PBT is the temperature at which their metabolic rate and bodily functions perform at an optimum level. For bearded dragons, the PBT is approximately 30-32°C. When providing heating for a reptile, the PBT must be taken into account. The enclosure should incorporate a range of temperatures, or what is known as a thermal gradient by using heating at one end to create the 'hot end' and no heating at the other to create a 'cool end'. These temperatures should be determined based on the PBT. For bearded dragons the hot end or the basking spot should sit between 35-42°C and the cool end between 25-27°C. Overnight the temperatures should not fall below 20°C and for many this means keeping heating on overnight or providing an alternative heating source.

Heat lamps (ceramic or infrared) are recommended over conductive heat sources (mats or rocks) for two reasons. Firstly, bearded dragons are heliotherms, meaning they bask under the sun and prefer a radiant heat source. Secondly, conductive heat sources, can and often do cause thermal burns. Heat lamps are kept in close proximity to the UV light source in the basking area. If a heat mat is used it should be used under the vivarium to prevent direct contact.

Temperatures should be monitored daily using both a thermostat at each end of the tank and a hand-held infrared temperature gun.

Bearded dragons require a low humidity environment at 30-40%. A large shallow water dish that can be used for drinking and/or bathing should provide sufficient humidity. Humidity levels can be monitored using a hygrometer.

Lighting

Bearded dragons require full spectrum UVA and UVB lighting 12 hours a day. They should also be offered exposure to unfiltered direct sunlight for at least half an hour per week.

There are a large range of UV lights available on the market. These lights have varying quality and light spectra. It is essential that the light used includes UVA and UVB with a UVB range of 290-320nm. A 10.0 strength should be used. There are 4 types of UV light forms; fluorescent tube, fluorescent bulb, metal halide and mercury vapour lamps. Mercury vapour and metal

halide lamps can provide concentrated heat and light like a patch of sunlight and are often better for bearded dragons but some metal halide lamps need to be combined with an additional UVB lamp. The light must be placed under the glass or mesh.

High quality brands include Sylvania, Arcadia and Zoomed.

UV lights need to be replaced at least every 6 months. UV monitors are available to measure UV output.

Socialisation

Whilst bearded dragons can be housed in pairs or groups, unfortunately fighting can occur. Particularly when there are discrepancies in size. If you plan to house bearded dragons in pairs or groups it is important to ensure the enclosure is large enough to allow them enough space to move away from the dragon and resources including hides, climbing surfaces, food and water sources need to be plentiful to avoiding fighting over these resources.

Health Care

Bearded dragons should receive a health check with a reptile-savvy veterinarian every 6-12 months. At this check a thorough physical exam should be performed as well as a faecal analysis on a fresh faecal sample to rule out parasites.

Bearded dragons do not require routine worming or parasite control. If parasites are detected on faecal exam this is usually and indicator of underlying health issues and/or poor enclosure hygiene.

Any newly acquired bearded dragons should receive an assessment by a reptile-savvy veterinarian as soon as possible. This allows to veterinarian to detect any underlying health conditions and/or husbandry issues. It also allows screening for certain infectious diseases if required.

All new reptiles should be quarantined in a separate enclosure and room for 3-6 months before being introduced to any other reptiles in the household.



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Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is very important to maintain the mental and physical health of your bearded dragon. Bearded dragons should be provided with the largest enclosure possible to maintain an appropriate thermal environment but also to allow them to exercise.

Weekly activity outside is beneficial for allowing bearded dragons exposure to unfiltered sunlight as well as providing them new natural environments to explore and opportunities for exercise.

A variety of natural branches and logs should be provided for climbing exercise and multiple hides so that the dragon can hide away when they feel scared. The environment should reflect their natural environment as closely as possible.



Enrichment Ideas

- Natural branches and logs for climbing
- Native browse/tree branches in enclosure
- Hiding vegetable/plant food sources in logs for your bearded dragon to find. All fresh food must be removed at the end of the day
- A number of caves/hides
- Weekly (ideally more frequent) supervised time outside with unfiltered sunlight