

Care of Bearded Dragons

Companion Avian and Exotic Pet Medicine and Surgery Service
Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA
(530) 752-1393

Natural History The two most common pet bearded dragons are *Pogona vitticeps* and *P. barbata*. They are found in the rocky, semi-desert areas of Australia and Tasmania. Bearded dragons are ground dwellers, but will climb rocks and low branches. They are active during daylight hours.

Special Characteristics

- Longevity:** In captivity, bearded dragons can live 7 to 10 years with proper care. They become sexually mature between 10 and 18 months.
- Size:** Adults will reach a total length of 15-20 inches.
- Temperament:** Bearded dragons make wonderful pets. They are generally very docile, and usually take well to handling. They are curious and attentive to their surroundings. Interesting behaviors include arm waving, head bobbing, and digging.

Captive Care Requirements

- Lighting:** Ultraviolet B is required to maintain bearded dragons. The best source of UVB is the sun, but a special **fluorescent** bulb containing no less than 5% UVB (should say so on package) can be purchased from a reptile shop. This bulb must be placed no more than 12 inches from the basking site, and should be on a timer to provide about 14 hours of daylight and 10 hours of darkness. It must be replaced every 3-6 months, because the UVB fades even though visible light is still emitted. Light bulbs with a screw-in end (even those sold as "full spectrum" bulbs) provide heat, but not UVB.
- Temperature:** The daytime temperature of the tank should be between 80-85° F with a basking spot of 88-95° F. A lamp that emits heat should be placed above one end of the tank, providing a temperature gradient with one side of the tank warmer than the other. Select the wattage of the bulb to provide the proper temperature within the tank. Under tank heaters are useful to gently raise the overall temperature of the tank, but should be used with a thermostat or rheostat to accommodate changing ambient temperatures. At night the temperature should drop to 70-75° F. When room temperatures are below 70° F at night, use an under tank heater or a ceramic heat emitter. Obviously, at least two thermometers must be in use to monitor these temperatures, but digital thermometers that can measure ambient temperature are now readily available. Care must be taken to prevent burns to the lizard. Heating elements can be dangerous if not used properly, and a smoke alarm is recommended.
- Humidity:** Good ventilation is essential and the humidity should be moderate (40-60% RH).
- Water:** Provide a water pan that is large enough for the whole dragon to soak its body. Lizards often defecate in their water, so it must be replaced daily and the pan disinfected with dilute bleach at least once a week.
- Enclosure:** Bearded dragons grow quickly, so it is best to start with a large enclosure. A single adult bearded dragon will do well in a 75 or 120 gallon aquarium with a screen top. When building an enclosure, it should be at least 48" long, 24" wide, and 18" high. It must be able to maintain high temperatures but also be well ventilated. It must also be easy to disinfect.

- Substrate:** The bottom of the enclosure should be covered with something safe and easy to clean. Since bearded dragons will eat bedding made of small particles, do not use them. Never use sand (including biodegradable calcium-based sands), wood chips, or gravel. Good choices include newspaper, indoor/outdoor carpet, or, if routine disposal is possible, sterile potting soil.
- Cage furniture:** Provide branches to climb, rocks to bask upon, and shelter to hide in. Ideally a rock should be placed under the heat lamp that is above the under-tank heater. Hardy plants like sansevieria, aloe, palms, and cycads may be used.
- Feeding:** Bearded dragons are omnivorous, and require a varied diet. A salad of calcium rich leafy greens and other vegetables should be offered daily. The following dark greens should make up the great majority of the salad: collards, dandelion greens and flowers, escarole, endive, grape leaves, mustard greens, turnip greens, and watercress. These vegetables can be mixed to make up the rest of the salad: acorn squash, red and green bell peppers, butternut squash, carrots, green beans, lentils, peas, pumpkin and other winter squash, snow peas, sweet potatoes, and turnips. The following should **be fed sparingly** as occasional treats: cabbage, chard, and kale are high in calcium oxalates which can cause metabolic bone disease; spinach, broccoli, and parsley are high in goitrogens which decrease thyroid function; corn, cucumbers, radishes, sprouts, and zucchini are low in nutrition. A number of fruits (without seeds or pits) and flowers can be added as treats as well: apples, apricots, bananas, berries, cantaloupe, figs, grapes, mangos, oranges, papayas, peaches, pears, plums, tomatoes, *Ficus benjamina*, geraniums, hibiscus flowers and leaves, pansies, petunias, pothos, rose petals and leaves, snail vine, and violets. Insects make up a substantial portion of the diet as well. Crickets and mealworms are widely available and can be "gutloaded." Depending upon the size of the bearded dragon, insects should be chosen by size. You must feed very small prey to baby bearded dragons. When fed insects too large for them, serious health problems including partial paralysis, seizures, loss of motor control, inability to self-feed, gut impaction and even death often occur. Start with feeding pinhead crickets and tiny, freshly molted worms, moving only slowly and gradually to larger sizes, phasing in day-old pinky mice when they are ready for them. Infant mice (pinkies) can be offered once a week to dragons over four months of age. Choose the age and size of mice according to the size of the lizard. Always feed bearded dragons in a dish to prevent ingestion of cage substrate.
- Supplements:** Juvenile bearded dragons require calcium (without added phosphorus/vitamin D) supplementation three times each week, and a high quality reptile multivitamin once per month. These should be sprinkled over salads. All insects should be "gut-loaded" with a high quality insect diet to ensure quality nutrition for your bearded dragon. Insects should also be "dusted" with a calcium powder right before feeding. Adult dragons on a good diet (leafy greens, "gut-loaded" and dusted insects, and pinkies) will do well with weekly calcium and monthly multivitamin supplementation.

Grooming and Handling

Bearded dragons will learn to tolerate routine handling. When handled on a daily basis, they seem to become more relaxed as time goes on, and cleaning the enclosure is simplified when the animal is docile. Bearded dragon skin is very rough, so light gloves and long sleeves will protect from mild scratches. Their toenails also become needle-sharp, and should be trimmed every few weeks. Finally, because all reptiles are potentially infected with *Salmonella* bacteria, which can be transmitted from reptiles to humans, routine cleanliness and hygiene are essential.

