

Bearded Dragons As Pets

(*Pogona vitticeps*)

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Introduction

The Common Bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*), otherwise known as the Central, Inland or Yellow-headed Bearded dragon originates from arid, semi-desert parts of Australia. They are calm and curious dragons, each with their own personality, which makes them great pets.

Development

Hatchling (day 1 to 6 weeks), juvenile (6 weeks to 9 months), adult (9 months and older). The lifespan of a Bearded dragon is approximately 7 to 12 years.

Housing

Adult Beardies can grow up to about 60 cm in length (sometimes larger). For this a terrarium of at least (90 l x 45 w x 40 h) cm is needed for a single dragon while a pair needs a terrarium of at least (180 l x 45 w x 40 h) cm.

Good bedding substrates include newspaper, butcher/brown paper carpet and astroturf. Inappropriate substrates such as sand, soil, egg shells, corn cob or any sized gravel or pebbles can give problems with ingestion and subsequent impaction.

Do not house different sized / aged dragons together until they are at least six months old. Larger Bearded dragons tend to “bully” the smaller ones and can even cause fatal biting injuries.

Maintenance

Daily

Feeding, cleaning food containers, replacing water, poop scooping and removing old food residues.

Monthly

Terrarium cleaning and substrate replacement. Replacement of heat and UV source (UV lights should be replaced every 5 to 6 months). Cleaning and sterilization of cage decorations and equipment. Diluted F10 can be used for effective and safe cleaning of terrariums or cage furniture.

Yearly

Inspection of all electrical equipment, plugs & switches should be done twice a year.

Environment

Temperature

Beardies are ectothermic (relying on external heat sources to keep their body temperature at a suitable level) and poikilothermic (having a variable body temperature). A basking spot should be supplied (use a 60 Watt spotlight about 20 cm above a flat piece of rock). This will also provide most of the environmental heat. For a dragon to thermoregulate, temperatures should range from about 24 °C on one side to about 34 °C on the other, the hot spot of course being hotter (about 40 °C).

To provide shade and a cooler surface to climb on, driftwood or a piece of stomp should be placed on the cooler side of the terrarium. Although not necessary, night temperatures can drop to as low as 17 °C.

Lighting

For UVA and UVB requirements a full spectrum reptile lamp (preferably 5% or more) should be mounted about 30 cm above the basking area. UVA helps make food appear more appealing thus stimulating feeding behavior. UVB is needed for calcium absorption and bone mineralization. For sufficient UV requirements with or without UV lamps reptiles should be placed in natural sunlight for at least one to two hours a day.

Day Length/Photoperiod

All lights (including heat lights) should be on for about 14 hours per day. Commercially available electric timers can be used to automate the light cycle.

Feeding

Beardies are omnivorous, which means they eat meat (mostly insects) and plant material. Young dragons are more dependant on proteins, thus their diet should consist of insects with about 20% fruits, greens and vegetables. From about 10 months a gradual change to mostly plant material can be made. A good rule of thumb is that food (insects & plant material) should be about the same length as the space between the animal's eyes, but for larger dragons it can be up to 2/3rds of its head.

Crickets are commercially the most available insects and it is jam packed with most of the Beardies' nutritional needs. Insects can be fed dead or alive. It should always be gut loaded and dusted two to three times a week with a suitable calcium supplement. It is recommended that the crickets of growing babies and juveniles and gravid females are dusted three times a week, otherwise two times should be adequate. To gut load insects additional fruits and vegetables (mentioned below for Bearded dragons) and a good quality cat food can be fed 24 to 48 before feeding.

Suitable fruits include kiwis, grapes, strawberries, bananas and papayas while greens include lucerne, nasturtium, carrot tops, parsley, celery, rosemary, oregano and basil. Vegetables such as carrots, corn, green beans, peas and beetroot are also favourites. Onions, spinach and cabbage type vegetables should be avoided.

Feeding should preferably take place within the terrarium where the animal is used to its immediate temperature. Young dragons should preferably be fed three to four times a day (not less than two times a day) while older Beardies can be fed daily or every other day. Feeding should take place not more than two hours before lights out and not less than two hours after lights on. Feed as much as the animal can eat within 15 minutes.

Handling

Gently scoop up your dragon with your hand under its belly and always take care to support your dragon. Let them rest in your palm with your fingers gently curled over the back. It is important to always wash your hands with a suitable disinfectant soap after handling a Bearded dragon, its food or its cage furniture.

Health

Regular health inspections with a reptile friendly veterinarian are vital in the continual health of your pet. Try to bring a fresh faecal sample, sealed in an airtight ziplock bag, with your reptile to the consult room.

Some of the most common health problems of Bearded dragon include gut parasites, environmental stress, metabolic bone disease (MBD), sand impactions, physical injuries due to falling, burns from incorrect placed heat sources and stress. Most of these can be avoided with the correct husbandry. MBD can be prevented by the combination of enough calcium and the correct UV lighting. Less common problems include parasites such as ticks, lice and adenovirus.

Other health problems include gut parasites and physical injuries. Consult your reptile friendly veterinarian or herpetologist if any of the abovementioned problems occur.

The critical first few days of your new Bearded dragon

- Keep temperature constant
- Keep photoperiod constant
- Restrict handling
- Only feed gut loaded & dusted food
- Give food in flat container within site of the basking and sitting areas
- Keep the terrarium closed at all times
- Give finely chopped veggies

Suggested Further Reading

www.beardeddragons.co.za

[The Advanced Bearded Dragon Manual](#)

[The Basic Bearded Dragon Manual](#)

& various other related literature sources